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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 13 October 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Stevenson and Company, Cullybackey

Mr Speaker: Mr Mervyn Storey has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I shall call Mr Storey to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call other Members from the constituency of North Antrim, as agreed with party Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes in which to speak. There will be no opportunity for interventions, for questions or for a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business has been concluded. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Storey: Members will have seen on television, or read in news reports over the weekend, of the proposed closure of Stevenson and Company, who are pork processors in Cullybackey in my North Antrim constituency. The business has been in operation since 1850 and has been located at the Cullybackey site since the 1980s. It had previously been located, and had its genesis, in Ballymoney.

Such a closure would be a blow at any time, but, in the current economic climate, it will be a major blow, not only for North Antrim but for the entire Northern Ireland pig industry. Recently, the costs of producing food have risen sharply. Trading costs for the Stevenson plant have risen by more than £4,500 a week; electricity costs have risen by around 40%; and the cost of oil has risen by around 37%. Indeed, businesses in Northern Ireland have the highest electricity costs of anywhere in the United Kingdom. Although a larger company may be able to absorb those costs for a longer time, small processors such as Stevenson's simply cannot bear that kind of cost.

I have had discussions today with Mr Hamill and other representatives from the company, and also with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment,

Arlene Foster. I appreciate the time that she gave to the company this morning to facilitate that meeting.

The Minister has assured me that if her Department can do anything to help the company, it will do so. We, alongside our colleagues in the House and the constituency, will continue to do all that we can to ensure that all the options for the future are considered. I hope that all is not lost, and I am certainly doing all that I can to find an alternative way forward.

I hope that I speak for all sides of the House when I say that our thoughts are with those people who face the prospect of job losses at this particularly worrying time. For families, the situation is immensely stressful. Many of the families affected live in the immediate vicinity of the plant, but others live further afield, too.

We should also be concerned about the wider effects on the pig industry in Northern Ireland. At a time such as this, I would have thought that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development would be prepared to meet with her Executive colleagues. Unfortunately, her party's priorities seem to lie elsewhere. The devolution of any other issue, or the consideration of any other political matter, is cold comfort to the families in my North Antrim constituency who face the prospect of job losses. I hope that such events will help to focus everybody's minds, time and talent on the realities that face Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Storey for bringing this issue to the Assembly's attention. I echo his comment that the news of the proposed closure of Stevenson and Co is devastating, not only for North Antrim, but for the pig industry as a whole. Utmost in our minds are those families who will be so badly affected by its closure, particularly in the run-up to Christmas.

The company has announced that it may close as a result of rising overheads, and we are all well aware of the recent huge increases in the price of electricity and oil. The Ulster Farmers' Union has highlighted the problem that is facing not only producers, but farmers: the cost of producing food is rising dramatically. Farm produce, such as pork, is being sold at a discount in the supermarkets in reaction to the credit crunch that consumers are facing. However, there is not enough revenue to cover the farmers', or, indeed, producers' costs.

The announcement that the company is to close is clearly devastating for those who live in its immediate vicinity. However, it should also sound a warning bell to other players in the pig industry and to farmers in general. We must take cognisance of that fact. I am sure that all Ministers, including the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, will consider the situation and do their utmost to help those affected by it. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I congratulate Mr Storey for bringing this matter to the House. The current credit crunch has taught us a great many lessons that we would perhaps have preferred not to learn; chief among them being the fact that it is nearly always preferable to keep an enterprise open than to close it down. I deeply regret the proposed closure of Stevenson and Co, a very old firm that has done so much for the economy of mid-Antrim for so many years. The company has weathered many an economic storm: there have been many times when it found it difficult to carry on, but it always did so, until now.

I have learnt from conversations with the firm's managers that the business was not brought to crisis point by one single issue; rather many economic pressures have led to this conclusion. I am also very sorry that the closure will happen in the month of Christmas, as Mr McKay said. I fully understand the reasons behind the firm's decisions, and the firm and its workers have my deepest sympathy as they face this crisis.

We must all work together — this is not a time for one person or one party to be left to carry the burden. There must be an urgent reassessment of the margins for pig producers because the firm's closure will have a domino effect. In addition to the firm's owners, management and workers, it will affect farm workers, families and local shops.

The standard reaction of people to whom I have spoken in the last few days — in person and on the telephone at my home and office — is a lack of confidence in the Assembly. To put it bluntly, they are asking whether we are going to continue to make a pig or an ass of ourselves while people go to the wall. It is time for us to be realistic and to work together for the benefit of our people.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr O'Loan: I thank Mr Mervyn Storey for bringing this matter to the attention of the Assembly. I assure him that his words about the unfortunate likely total closure of the Stevenson factory in Cullybackey have the support of the entire Assembly. The serious concerns that have been raised are about the 100 jobs that could be lost, the hardship for those individuals and their families, and the economic blow to the local area due to the loss of wages and salaries.

As has been said, among the reasons for the closure is the serious rise in energy costs. Indeed, that is a worry for the entire industrial sector. In addition to the direct consequences of the closure for the factory's workers, management and owners, there are serious consequences for local pig farmers who will not necessarily be able to find alternative outlets for their produce. That is a great worry.

I encourage all the agencies that have a role in the orderly rundown of the Stevenson plant — and all

those who can make a contribution to the economic continuity of the agricultural sector, and other sectors in that area — to do everything that they can to help in a very difficult situation.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am sure that all of us are worried about the proposed closure of the Stevenson plant in the Ballymena area. However, it is a proposed closure. I am glad that representations to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are continuing, and it may be that the company can be sustained under a different ownership.

Members should do everything in their power to prevent the closure of the Stevenson factory, and I believe that Members for North Antrim will make that effort. It would be a good victory for us all if the plant were kept open. That would provide encouragement to every part of the constituency and, indeed, to every part of Northern Ireland. There is unity among the representatives of the area and those from outside. I trust that today's short debate will help the situation.

As the Member of Parliament for the area, I will push as hard as I possibly can to achieve the continuation of the factory, albeit under different management. The present management is very keen for the factory to be saved; there is no selfishness in their minds or hearts. That is a good thing, because only a united approach can save the factory. I hope that this debate is heeded by the powers that be, and that the decision will be changed.

12.15 pm

A word of warning — in the present situation there will be more bad news such as this. The economy is bankrupt. Without a change of attitude, all the mending skills in the world will not alter that. Everybody must co-operate as much as possible, in unity, in order to stave off disaster.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Community Use of Schools Premises Bill

First Stage

Mr McNarry: I beg to introduce the Community Use of Schools Premises Bill [NIA 1/08], which is a Bill to make provision for community use of school premises.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Regulation of Private Landlords

Mr Speaker: I remind Members of the requirements of Standing Order 69 in relation to the declaration of any interest relevant to a debate.

The Business Committee agreed, at its meeting on Tuesday 7 October, that, where two or more amendments to a motion are selected, an extra 15 minutes will be added to the length of the debate. The basis for that decision was to ensure that other Members who wished to be called were not unduly impacted upon by the time taken to move and wind up multiple amendments. Up to one hour and 45 minutes will, therefore, be allocated for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up.

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a proposal for legislation on the regulation of private landlords.

I accept both amendments, because their intent is in keeping with the spirit of the motion.

A Cheann Comhairle agus a chaired. I brought a similar motion on the registration of private landlords to this House more than a year ago. After that motion won Members' support, I firmly believed that the Minister for Social Development would introduce legislation that would make it mandatory for landlords in the private-rented sector to register. However, for reasons that are baffling — and despite the fact that the previous motion was given full support in this Chamber, including the support of the Minister and her party — that has not been the case.

What have been the consequences to tenants of the Minister's failure and her reluctance to legislate for the sentiments of the motion passed in October 2007? Many tenants in the private-rented sector have been illegally evicted from their homes or cheated out of their deposits. Other tenants have been intimidated by landlords who told them that complaining about deplorable living conditions would lead to their being left on the streets.

Sinn Féin has long recognised that many landlords in the private-rented sector play a major role in the provision of decent housing for their tenants. It is accepted that many in the private sector provide excellent accommodation. However, while many in that sector recognise the existence of bad landlords, they disagree about how they should be regulated. Nor is it agreed that there are too many landlords providing poor units of accommodation. The best way forward that was suggested by the private-rented sector was to allow the market to regulate it. In light of recent events in relation to the global credit crisis, surely there are clear indications that the market is not capable of regulating any sector.

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

We have also raised concerns about the role of some estate agents in the private-rented sector. Some agents have changed their charging arrangements from monthly to four-weekly payments so that they can extract an extra four weeks' rent over the calendar year. That is gross manipulation of tenants, many of whom cannot afford to pay the additional money and go into debt to do so. It amounts to an attack on the neediest people in our society.

The continuous problem of landlords charging rent that is substantially higher than the housing benefit rate for particular areas forces many people into debt, and that practice is widespread. There are mechanisms in place for people to make complaints, but most people will not complain because of threats of violence or eviction. For many people it is better to suffer than to sleep on the streets.

In a question for written answer to the Minister for Social Development, the Member for North Belfast Fred Cobain asked how many enforcement orders had been brought against landlords under the Private Tenancies Order 2006. The reply stated that district councils are proactive in carrying out their responsibilities, with one enforcement case in Ards, two in Ballymoney, 13 in Banbridge, 42 in Belfast, 14 in Carrickfergus, five in Castlereagh, three in Craigavon, one in Down, one in Dungannon and three in Newtownabbey. There was no mention of the other councils across the North, but that is the standard under which those councils have operated. Many other

landlords lease houses that are in poor condition but have not been inspected.

Sinn Féin does not distinguish between landlords who provide accommodation in houses in multiple occupation (HMO) and landlords in the private-rented sector. Many landlords supply houses to both sectors, therefore, the whole sector must be regulated by the same legislation.

In a recent consultation document, the Housing Executive said:

“Out of 134 statutory notices served on HMOs in Dungannon 49 (36%) were abated by the landlord moving the tenants ... to unknown destinations.”

The document went on to state that although the Housing (Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation) Regulations 1993 require landlords to provide managers of schemes to pass on relevant information, there is no incentive in the regulations to make them do so.

Some landlords ignore the system; therefore, strong legislation, such as mandatory registration, is required for the entire private-rented sector, as it is the only effective way of dealing with those landlords.

The same document stated that 11% of HMOs in south Belfast were unfit for human habitation, as were 17% in north Belfast, 2% in Coleraine and 13% in Derry. The document further stated that, given that there are thousands of unregistered HMOs, those figures are actually far worse. In my constituency of West Belfast, it is not known how many of those houses exist. In fact, the private-rented sector has grown in West Belfast to such an extent that it is undermining the social fabric of many districts. Many properties are in poor condition, and we have all heard the horror stories about houses in bad states of repair. I am sure that many Members have dealt with such issues as antisocial tenants being forced on local residents, and residents' complaints that have gone unheeded by landlords who do not care because they are getting the high rents demanded.

I have spoken to many people in the housing sector and in local government who have said that those problems are but a drop in the ocean. Without stronger powers and mandatory registration, their ability to deal with those problems is being seriously undermined. It is difficult to comprehend why the Minister is reluctant to implement the necessary legislation, as tens of millions of pounds in housing benefit is paid to landlords every year.

In the past, it has been intimated that the remit of the private-rented sector is to be widened to allow more people to move into the sector, especially given the lack of social housing. For many people, moving to the private-rented sector is seen as a last resort, and, with no regulation to protect tenants, they will be

condemned to living at the mercy of many unscrupulous landlords. All available information points to mandatory registration as the only weapon available to ensure that tenants are protected.

We ask the Minister to commit to introducing legislation that will allow some control over the private-rented sector and make it mandatory that all landlords be registered. Sinn Féin proposes that, in order to make mandatory registration effective, the legislation must contain measures that ensure compliance and impose strong penalties for non-compliance. We ask the Assembly to support the motion in order that we may send a clear message to the victims of unscrupulous landlords that we are no longer prepared to accept this deplorable situation.

Mr Simpson: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“recognises the intention of the Minister for Social Development to bring forward legislation to regulate private landlords; and calls on the Minister to ensure that these regulations will tackle unfitness in the sector, whilst ensuring that unnecessary bureaucracy is avoided.”

I declare an interest as a very good landlord, in a very small way.

I support the amendment that stands in my name and that of my colleagues. The motion is in need of two things: first, it and its sponsors must be challenged; and, secondly, the motion needs to be amended.

The motion was tabled by three Sinn Féin MLAs. Given the fact that those three Sinn Féin MLAs felt so exercised about the issue that they tabled the motion, I imagine that they want people to believe that the matter is of pressing importance to them and that it is one of their priorities. That is interesting, given where we are as an Assembly at present, and given their party leader's recent foot-stamping as he desperately tries to appear relevant to a world that has passed him by.

The following question must be asked: if the Minister for Social Development were to introduce legislation tomorrow, would the three Sinn Féin MLAs' attachment to the issue be enough for them to urge their colleagues to attend an Executive meeting to approve its introduction? There is absolutely no point in Members tabling motion after motion, calling for Minister after Minister to take action after action, only for them to then say that they will not go along to discuss the possible introduction of legislation on the subject.

For a community that is well used to Sinn Féin hypocrisy and double standards, to say that this is one of that party's more obvious and less convincing motions is really saying something. Then again, I may be being unkind to the three MLAs. Perhaps the new Sinn Féin policy is government by urgent procedure. Perhaps that is the brave new world into which Mr Adams is leading his party — time will tell. Either way, the real question

that hangs over the motion is not one for the Minister or any other party in the Chamber to answer but one for the three Members who tabled it and their party to answer.

It is clear that the motion should be amended. Our amendment embraces all the essential ingredients needed for a debate on the regulation of private landlords. The Minister for Social Development is to introduce legislation. Draft proposals are to be put out for consultation by March 2009. We welcome that commitment. Of course, the three Sinn Féin Members in whose name the motion stands already know that, or, at least, they should know it, which again —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: No, I will not give way. Serious doubt is cast over the motion's real intent. Our amendment also highlights two pressing requirements: the legislation must incorporate a way in which to tackle landlords' responsibilities for housing unfitness; and it must ensure that unnecessary bureaucracy is avoided.

12.30 pm

Some issues of concern are the registration of private landlords; the general fitness of a premises for human habitation; the resolution of tenancy disputes; prompt repairs; how, when, and how often rents can be increased; the length of contract; notice to quit; and the protection of tenancy deposits. There are also issues to do with training landlords on their rights and on those of tenants. Those matters are all of huge importance to anyone who has entered into a private-rented agreement, or who is about to do so.

There are also issues regarding landlords' rights in dealing with the small minority of problem tenants; however, time will not allow for a full discussion of those matters. At the beginning of my contribution, I declared an interest as a landlord, so I speak from experience. It is a serious issue for a landlord when a tenant stops paying rent, then disappears after trashing an apartment; I am sure that I am not alone in experiencing that. Just as the majority of tenants are ordinary, hard-working, civic-minded people, so many private landlords do the right thing. Such people should not be overburdened by bureaucracy.

This is an important issue, despite the obvious hypocrisy that lies at the heart of Sinn Féin's motion and in that Assembly group's game-playing. Our amendment deals with the entirety of the issue, and I commend it to the House.

Ms Purvis: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

"to include provision for the mandatory registration of, and establishment of service standards for, private landlords."

Although I support Sinn Féin's motion in principle, it needs to go further by calling for the mandatory registration of landlords. On 1 October 2007, the House

debated and agreed to a motion that Fra McCann moved that called for the mandatory registration of all private-sector landlords. I have some sympathy with amendment No 1, but the issues facing those in the private-rented sector go beyond unfitness. This is a critical issue. More than a year ago, the House agreed to Fra McCann's motion, which called for legislation in that area. However, the Minister for Social Development has not introduced any legislation on the matter. In the meantime, the shortage of social housing and still-inflated house prices mean that many more people rely on the private-rented market for housing. Buy-to-let mortgages have increased the number of private-rented homes that are available, and renting privately is increasingly the tenancy agreement of choice for many young people.

Legislation to improve the sector is not about unnecessary bureaucracy. The mandatory registration of private landlords and the establishment of service standards should improve the quality of properties, improve standards for landlords' management of properties and tenancies, and improve the service for tenants. Housing is the number one issue that I deal with in my constituency office, and I do so regularly. Indeed, I would hazard a guess that that is the case for the majority of MLAs. In my office, many of the housing-related issues that we help people with are simply consequences of the absence of mandatory registration of private landlords.

Some tenants living in private housing that is in a state of disrepair cannot locate their landlords to request necessary repairs. That is a common problem that occurs daily. According to the 2006 house conditions survey, 64% of private-rented dwellings were classed as being in need of repairs. Some 27% of private-rented dwellings failed to meet the decent homes standard, the criteria for which state that a home must be in a reasonable state of repair, have reasonable modern facilities and services, and provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. Most of the tenants in such homes are elderly and on low incomes.

Neighbours who are affected by antisocial behaviour are sometimes unable to locate the owners of a dwelling in order to speak to them about the behaviour of their tenants. That is an issue. Sometimes, in my constituency, even the police have had difficulty in tracking down landlords to deal with issues of antisocial behaviour.

The inappropriate and, sometimes, illegal retention of a tenant's deposit by a landlord is also a problem. Recently, I was visited by a tenant who paid a £1,200 deposit for his or her flat, and the landlord refused to repay it when the contract ended, because a door handle had been broken. Furthermore, landlords are issuing 28-day notices to quit, or eviction notices, without even talking to the tenants concerned.

Most landlords are good citizens and respectable businesspeople, who meet their legal obligations, maintain their properties and look after their tenants. However, that is not always the case, and the consequences can be significant. Shelter is a basic human requirement; therefore, it is critical that those who provide that service, in either the public or private sector, adhere to reasonable standards for conduct and the quality of service that they provide. When that does not happen — as we now debate — we must legislate to make it happen.

Experience from other systems has shown that efforts to register landlords are most successful when compliance is mandatory. In Scotland, the attempted light touch has proved ineffective when trying to enforce standards, particularly with those landlords who do not register for whatever reason. Landlords should be required to provide their contact details and details of all their properties, and that information must be regularly updated. Therefore, registration must be mandatory, and a failure to register should result in a prosecution or a fine. There should be a system of sanctions for serious misconduct. The Department or office that is responsible for registration should have the authority to deregister landlords who fail to comply with legal requirements.

Registration can also be used to educate landlords about their legal obligations. The Housing Rights Service supports mandatory registration and suggests that registered landlords be provided with a licence on condition that they follow guidelines set down in an approved code of practice. Registered landlords would also have access to a dispute-resolution service. Tenants should have access to the register and should be able to retrieve, without charge, their landlord's current contact information. Moreover, there should be provision for a custodial-deposit scheme to ensure that deposits are managed safely and are not withheld by landlords, unreasonably or illegally. If there is a dispute over a deposit, tenants have access only to small claims courts, which are prohibitively expensive and time-consuming for most. Instead, landlords should be required to pay those deposits into a custodial system so that, if there is a disagreement over a deposit at the end of a tenancy, landlords and tenants will have access to the same dispute-resolution service, and a third party will oversee the process.

Although I welcome the Minister's commitment to bring forward proposals for legislation at the end of this session, it is not soon enough. I hear daily about the problem from constituents who come into my office. Proposals must be brought forward sooner and must include mandatory registration and the establishment of service standards for all private landlords. I am pleased to move the amendment.

Mr Cobain: I welcome the motion and support amendment No 1. Although I recognise the work that the Minister has undertaken, we still do not have sufficient social housing in Northern Ireland to meet the need. Therefore, the private-rented sector is crucial in housing some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Eleven per cent of Northern Ireland's housing stock is privately rented, and 44% of households in the private-rented sector live in fuel poverty.

In 2006, 27% of dwellings in the private-rented sector failed to meet the decent homes standards, and, over the past five years, there has been a 50% increase in the number of households presenting as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, due to a loss of rented accommodation. It is crucial that people who rent in both multiple-occupancy homes and alone are protected by legislation from the minority of rogue and complacent landlords.

I welcomed the introduction of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which provides a new structure for the private-rented sector in Northern Ireland. Although the Order covers other tenancy issues, it does not go far enough on unfitness and disrepair, rent controls and certificates of fitness.

It does not require landlords to register but relies on their co-operation, and that is the Order's weakness. I recognise that during the last debate on the issue, the Minister stated her desire to examine the success of the Order, looking at what has gone well, where the problems lie, and what more needs to be done.

I am sure that the Minister will inform the Assembly what difference the Order has made. However, I consider it a matter of practical necessity that the private-rented sector should be open and transparent, and in order for that to be guaranteed, the registration of private landlords and regulations that tackle unfitness in the sector are a must. If such measures are introduced, the room for complacency, bending the system and blatantly breaking the law would be removed. That would also benefit landlords as it would create a level playing field for business.

This is not an anti-private-rented sector motion in any way. The sector provides an excellent service for the majority of the time, and the DUP amendment recognises some of the fears that may exist in the sector with regard to increased bureaucracy.

It is crucial that the sector is given the freedom to maintain healthy competition and business practices while protecting the basic needs of its customers. The motion is not about excessive regulation but about creating good regulation that will benefit tenants and landlords. In the current global conditions, we are all beginning to recognise the benefits of good regulation. I, therefore, urge the Minister to look at practices in

Scotland and decipher what has worked and on what we in Northern Ireland can improve.

The credit crunch has crippled the first-time-buyers' market, and that will mean that in coming years, the private-rented sector will become even more important as people cannot afford to buy their own homes. Although I welcome the recent investment in the co-ownership scheme, the housing sector will face severe difficulties for the short term at least. It is, therefore, crucial that the correct regulation is in place in order to ensure that people can live in accommodation that is of an acceptable standard.

It has been almost six months since Sir John Semple referred to the matter in his review of affordable housing when he called for the registration of all landlords. However, despite unanimous support from all parties in the Assembly, the Minister has still not made a categorical move in that direction.

I recognise the pro-active work so far undertaken by the Minister. I urge her to introduce legislation that will adequately regulate private landlords, including registration, and tackle unfitness in the sector.

I support the motion as amended by amendment No 1.

Mr A Maginness: I advise any prospective football manager not to recruit Mr McCann to his team. Mr McCann is the master of own goals, and today he shows his mastery with regard to own goals. He moves a motion that has been exposed, including through remarks made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Simpson, as bogus. The motion has also been exposed as opening up a very simple line of attack on Sinn Féin, which is this: if the Minister were to produce legislation today on the regulation of private landlords, she could do nothing about it because the Executive are not meeting, and the reason for that is because Sinn Féin is boycotting Executive meetings.

Therefore, when Mr McCann hypocritically comes to this Chamber and cries about there having been a delay in legislation, he refuses to answer the fundamental question, namely, why is Sinn Féin blocking vital social policy legislation?

Mr F McCann: On a point of order. Mr Maginness is misleading the Assembly, because I have been consistent on the issue of mandatory registration.

12.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The term "misleading" is not parliamentary language, Mr McCann. That was not a point of order. Your remark was unparliamentary; therefore, I ask you to withdraw it.

Mr F McCann: I withdraw the remark. However, I must say that when Mr Maginness and Members from

other parties are particularly vocal against Members of the House —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order.

Mr A Maginness: I am happy to take an intervention from Mr McCann so that he can explain why, on the one hand, he supports Sinn Féin's boycott of the Executive, yet, on the other hand, he insists that legislation on that particular area of social policy be brought before the House immediately. If he wants to take the opportunity to explain that contradiction to the House, I am prepared to give way.

Mr F McCann: On 1 October 2007, I brought a motion on the mandatory regulation of landlords before the House. The new Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development will not be aware that I have also raised the matter on several occasions in Committee. Sinn Féin has taken a principled stand against the DUP's refusal to accept the fundamentals of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement, which take in equality and the very foundations on which the Assembly currently sits.

Mr A Maginness: I understand Sinn Féin's principled approach. However, the fact is that that principled approach is blocking vital legislation from coming before the House, not only on the mandatory registration of landlords but on a whole range of other issues. Fuel poverty, for example, is a pressing concern.

The country is in economic meltdown. Finances are in chaos, yet Sinn Féin insists on boycotting the Executive.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I will not give way, because I do not have much time left.

The SDLP accepts the motion's substance. It also accepts the proposed amendments. There is certainly a necessity for legislation to regulate private landlords. The Minister has committed to that as an objective of her term of office. As soon as she can, she will introduce legislation to deal with the issue. She cannot, however, simply introduce legislation without working out carefully its shape and form.

In Northern Ireland, 66% of the public money that is distributed through housing benefit is paid to private landlords. The private-rented sector accounts for around 12% of all housing stock. The SDLP fully supports good regulation, but any measures that are introduced must be carefully thought through. I am certain that the Minister will expedite the legislation that she sees fit to introduce.

As I said, I support the motion's substance. However, I must highlight its motivation. It appears that it has been designed to be a political attack on the

Minister, not on the social problems that arise from the private-rented sector.

Ms Lo: I thank Mr McCann for proposing the motion. I support it and the two proposed amendments. All add to the call for the regulation of private landlords.

Undoubtedly, the private-rented sector will expand in the coming months and years owing to current economic trends and the pattern of inward migration. All Members have heard of good and bad landlords.

In a recent case in South Belfast, the agency found three houses occupied by some 80 Roma — one house was found to have 30 people crammed into it. That is sheer exploitation of people by landlords.

With respect to public housing, the Housing Executive is responsible for the provision of decent homes and their maintenance in accordance with rules and regulations. The private-rented sector receives £1.4 million each year in housing benefit. Why should it not be held accountable for good management practice and standards of repair? The Housing Rights Service's briefing paper on the Bill makes good sense on that issue. We need a holistic approach to address a range of issues to make the sector fit for purpose. On the one hand, we must ask landlords to improve their practices; on the other, it is good to offer incentives for them to do so. On that, the briefing paper makes some useful suggestions.

The Assembly last debated mandatory registration of landlords in October 2007, and all Members agreed on the need for the registration of landlords. A register of landlords would make it much easier for councils and tenants to contact landlords when problems arise. In South Belfast, a tenant has been trying to contact his landlord for years so that repairs can be made. The building is now in a shocking state: a disused bath has been lying in the front garden for 10 years. Neighbours have written to my party asking for help in tracking down the landlord. They are understandably worried. Not only is the house an eyesore but, more importantly, the structural problems of that house may spread to adjoining properties.

Once registered, a landlord should be required to comply with an approved code of practice recognised by the courts. Failure to abide by that code should bring penalties — fines, or even deregistration.

I also support the suggestion of a deposit-protection scheme, whereby the landlords have to pay deposits that they receive from tenants into a custodial fund. We have seen examples whereby tenants — particularly students — pay a deposit to a letting agent, but cannot retrieve it from the landlord some years later. Landlords put up all sorts of excuses for refusing to return deposits. So often, people are reluctant to seek redress from the small claims court. Students who are preparing to

move on to other parts of the Province or to other parts of the UK or who are leaving Northern Ireland to take up jobs cannot wait for court procedure to take its course.

We need a comprehensive approach to rein in the private-rented sector through legislation that sets acceptable standards and provision of information and advice to landlords and tenants. I am sure that that will be welcomed, not only by tenants, but by the majority of landlords.

Mr Craig: I support amendment No 1.

One Member has commented that housing is the number one issue in her constituency. However, lack of housing is the number one priority in my constituency — and that applies to both public and private sectors. As has been said, examples of good and bad landlords exist in both private and public sectors.

Like other Members, I have received complaints from tenants about rented housing. Some of the worst examples of unfit housing that I have seen have been in the public sector, not in the private sector.

There are examples of good private landlords who take the issues seriously, but there are also examples of the worst kind. I presume that a lot of these landlords have come into the market because of the property boom that we have witnessed over the past couple of years. There are major issues surrounding private individuals who are renting out properties — they do not understand their obligations as landlords. They do not understand the issues. If landlords find themselves with tenants who are not behaving properly, or have to deal with evictions, they do not understand the laws, or how to get rid of those tenants and deal with the issues.

I support registration. I also support the Minister's moving forward with this legislation in March 2009. I look forward to seeing what is proposed in the Bill. We need to raise the standards of those who have moved into private landlordism and how they deal with their tenants.

We have all seen examples of tenants who are outrageous in their behaviour for whatever reason. We have all witnessed those who are either dealing in drugs or playing music until all hours of the night. Getting those people out of the property is a very complex issue. It is extremely complicated — even the Housing Executive has issues with moving out tenants like that.

An awareness scheme must be built into any proposed legislation. There are examples where legislation has been tried. If we look at the legislation that was introduced in Scotland in 2006, we can see the basis on which we could move this situation forward.

I commend the Minister for working on the issue. It is only right that she take her time to get the issue

right, because the rights of landlords and tenants are a legally complex issue. There is always a war going on between the two. The Minister must look long and hard at the serious issues, and get it right. I commend the Minister for continuing to work on the issues, and look forward to seeing the tentative legislation. As some of my party members have said, there is more chance of the legislation being introduced to the Social Development Committee than there is of seeing a meeting of the Executive.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is disappointing that Mr Simpson did not spend more time dealing with his amendment than he did attacking Sinn Féin. He initially spoke about being a good landlord in a small way. I am not sure if that means that he is good in a small way or that he is a landlord in a small way. That was not satisfactorily explained to me. I am sure that he will explain at some point.

Alban Maginness spoke about own goals, a subject in which he is well versed. If he is speaking about impending legislation from the Minister, he is getting into the realms of fantasy football. Maybe he should keep that in mind.

I will now try to deal with the motion —

Lord Morrow: I hope that you are not going to attack anybody?

Mr Brady: Hopefully not, but if I do, it is an education being here anyway.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Refer all your remarks through the Chair, and do not bat-and-ball them across the Chamber.

Mr Brady: If the remarks from across the way were, with respect —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. All remarks must be made from a standing position and not from a seated position.

1.00 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. For many people, the private-rented sector is their only avenue for accommodation, and any new strategy should promote the sector as a suitable option. As the sector is playing an increasingly important role, a strategic framework is needed to ensure responsible letting. New legislation should ensure that management standards and physical conditions are improved. The registration of landlords will mean that there is a more consistent and stronger approach to addressing the issues of bad management practices and poor fitness standards. A register will better enable local councils to progress enforcement action more effectively. When landlords are registered, they can be issued with a licence enabling them to follow guidelines laid down

by an approved code of practice. Landlords will have to abide by the legal obligations laid down in the relevant legislation; to ensure effectiveness, any registration scheme must be mandatory.

After the imposition of a register, a number of issues will have to be addressed. Relevant information on rights and responsibilities should be made available to landlords and tenants. The legislation must include powers to modify the inclusion and exclusion of those who must register. The enforcement body will have the power to deregister landlords who fail to comply with legal requirements. A tenant/landlord dispute-resolution service should also be included. As the registration scheme is being developed, interested stakeholders must be widely consulted.

A major source of dispute in the private-rented sector is the retention of tenancy deposits by landlords. In the legislation, a tenancy deposit protection scheme must be included so that deposits are safely managed and not, as happens in many cases, unreasonably withheld. Landlords appear to have a distinct lack of knowledge on the key issues affecting tenants, so it is essential that any new legislation gives landlords maximum access to information pertaining to them and their responsibilities.

In my constituency, there are private estates, 90% of which are owned by private landlords. That has led to considerable problems in the state of the houses and how tenants are treated, which contributes to a lack of community in those estates. I support the motion, and I wish to make a point concerning students, which has already been raised with the Minister for Employment and Learning. I have raised a certain case on several occasions, in which a student died and the money owed is still being pursued by the landlord, causing trauma and stress for that student's parents and family. Go raibh maith agat.

Miss McIlveen: I declare an interest, not as a good landlord but as an excellent landlord; I support amendment No 1.

The debate is perhaps asking more questions of Sinn Féin than of the Minister for Social Development. We are used to déjà vu in the Chamber, so I will restate some of the comments that have been made. Along with other Members, I am struck by the irony — or, more accurately, the hypocrisy — of Sinn Féin Members calling on the Minister for Social Development to act but not calling on its own Ministers, who are still refusing to fulfill their ministerial duties.

When the issue of private landlords was last debated, there was consensus that a registration scheme was, in principle, a good idea. My views have not changed; although I support the principle, I reserve final judgement until I see those firm proposals. No firm proposals have yet been produced; however, I

believe that we only have to wait for them until March 2009. At least we have a date for those proposals, unlike the next Executive meeting. Nevertheless, by that time, we will have a further year's experience of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Although that Order has been effective in some areas, it was criticised for not going far enough when it first came into force. The Housing Rights Service, in its recent briefing to the Committee for Social Development, alleged that many local councils' enforcement of the Order has been almost non-existent. The evidence for that is contained, purportedly, in a response to a question for written answer from the Member for North Belfast Mr Cobain. The response suggested that mandatory registration may assist enforcement, because local councils may not know the landlords' identity.

Without further investigation of the figures, it is a bit of a leap to level criticism at councils or to suggest that mandatory registration would have any impact. In its briefing to the Committee, the Housing Rights Service provided no evidence of further questions to the councils asking them to account for the ostensibly low figures.

The Housing Rights Service made several suggestions: the inclusion of a landlord licence in the mandatory registration scheme of private landlords; access to a dispute-resolution service for the landlord and the tenant; an assessment by councils of the fitness of properties built before 6 November 1956; the provision of information on rights and responsibilities to landlords and tenants; prosecution for failure to register; and deregistration for those who fail to comply with their responsibilities. Finally, it suggested that the scheme be phased in.

In general, there is not much to disagree with in those proposals, other than whether the power to deregister a landlord would assist a tenant residing in one of his or her houses. However, the details of such a proposal would, no doubt, be ironed out during consultation with stakeholders.

The Minister previously stated that she was investigating various registration schemes. Given that she responded to Mr McCann and Mr O'Dowd to that effect in May 2008, and advised the former that any legislation would be introduced in the final session of this Assembly's mandate, it is wholly premature to debate the matter yet again.

However, the amendment that my colleagues tabled provides a welcome addition to the debate. For the sake of completeness, I will again set out, as I did in October 2007, my thoughts on the overall issue. I agree with the concept of mandatory registration to provide a level of security to tenants that the rented property is of an appropriate standard and that the landlord is reputable. Any proposed register must

allow for access to required information only and should not be a means to facilitate prying into the affairs of individuals.

Members should be concerned by the cost of administering and enforcing the scheme. We must ensure that bureaucracy be kept to a minimum to facilitate the smooth running of an effective system that safeguards tenants but does not become so onerous for landlords that it becomes unworkable. I support amendment No 1.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the motion, and I support the DUP amendment. It is crucial to protect vulnerable people from bad landlords. It should be recognised that the private-rented sector is essential to the housing stock and that the vast majority of landlords follows best practice. However, those landlords who do not respect their tenants have a damaging effect on their quality of life, be that through demands for excessive rent, disputes about deposits or the provision of accommodation that does not meet the required standard. Many people who have limited housing options are at the mercy of unprincipled landlords. Therefore, it is crucial that the Assembly introduce legislation to ensure that landlords meet required standards.

The DUP's amendment, as my colleague noted, recognises landlords' potential concerns about the increasing bureaucracy that will affect the sector. New legislation should be regarded as a way in which to ensure a level playing field for landlords, in order that some do not gain an unfair advantage over others or at the expense of their tenants. It is important not to damage the supply of private-rented accommodation.

I draw Members' attention to regulations that were introduced in Scotland in 2006. They include several rational exemptions from registration and ensure that judgments are based on adopting a sensible and practical approach before deciding that sanctions are necessary. Landlords have a duty of care to the buildings that they own and to the people who live in them. In the coming months, Sinn Féin has a duty of care to this Building and to the people whom it was elected to represent.

In the coming months, the private-rented sector will become increasingly important because the first-time-buyers' market is stagnant and people will, potentially, fail to renew their mortgages. Therefore, it is vital that legislation is in place to regulate the system properly. People should feel safe and secure in rented accommodation and in their homes, and the Assembly must ensure that the important amendment is noted.

Mr G Robinson: I appreciate that the majority of private landlords are responsible and can manage their tenants without difficulty. It is essential that all responsible landlords understand that message. The

motion targets landlords who do not fulfil their responsibilities. Not all tenants are saints, and we must be mindful of the vital role that private-sector lettings play in accommodating our population. Therefore, there must be a balance in any registration programme that is produced. We cannot allow a black market in substandard accommodation to develop — that may be a consequence of ill-judged or rushed regulation.

I represent a constituency that — because of the University of Ulster at Coleraine and high tourist levels — has a large number of private-sector landlords. I have heard nightmare stories from constituents who have — and I use the word advisedly — suffered at the hands of some private landlords, who refuse to fix broken locks and attempt to intimidate tenants from properties. Such disgusting behaviour is often inflicted on those who are least able to fight back or seek help.

A compulsory registration scheme for landlords would give tenants greater security, and ensure good living conditions and a fair rent. The private-rented sector is becoming an increasing part of the housing stock, and, therefore, it is essential that the Assembly ensures the protection of the large number of people who seek accommodation in that sector. The private sector cuts across all economic barriers. Furthermore, private rentals are likely to increase, because an increasing number of young people and couples are experiencing difficulty gaining public-sector housing or affording a mortgage.

The compulsory regulation of landlords would not be a punishment, rather a means of ensuring that all accommodation is of good quality. Good or bad housing does not affect only the well-being of those who live in it. Bad housing may lead to health problems, which can impact on a child's education or an individual's ability to get a job.

I know that the Minister takes the issue seriously, and I acknowledge that the problem is being investigated in order to find a way to deal with it. However, given the current economic downturn, the urgency with which the issue is addressed must be stepped up a gear. I support the amendment.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The motion and amendments provide a welcome and timely opportunity to highlight the considerable work that is already under way to deliver improvements in the private-rented sector, which is now almost as large as the public-rented sector in Northern Ireland. In recent years, the private-rented sector has undergone much innovation. The introduction of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which came into effect in April 2007, came on foot of earlier private-rented strategy. Those initiatives delivered improvements and established a new system

of regulation, which gave tenants and landlords much-needed rights, protections and responsibilities.

At that time, the objectives of those initiatives were far-reaching. However, the housing situation has subsequently developed and now faces new challenges. Some aspects tackled by the previous strategy and legislation have become much more acute.

The private-rented sector is now home to many more vulnerable people, so we must be confident that arrangements in the sector are robust and professional, and ensure that the right level of protection is afforded to the tenants and to the landlords who provide services.

1.15 pm

Over the past couple of years, the fast-moving developments in the housing market — together with their associated impact on the private-rented sector's contribution and potential to meet housing need — prompted me to commission a further review of my policy relating to the private-rented sector earlier this year. I am surprised that some Members were not aware of that. Many of the points that Members made today support that approach.

There should be a new focus on core issues, such as more effective tenancy management; robust arrangements for the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants; effective tenancy deposit arrangements; better security of tenure for people moving into private-rented accommodation; and other matters. That work is already in progress and I will have the results, together with draft proposals for a new private-rented strategy, by March or April next year. At that stage, I intend to consult widely on those proposals.

I will use that review to consider the initial impact of The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. Although that legislation is still in the early stages of implementation, I will measure its immediate impact against its key objectives. I will study its effect of improving awareness and understanding of the new obligations and rights of landlords and tenants. Early evidence suggests that there is a continued lack of knowledge at all levels. The experiences and views of Members that were expressed today support some of that analysis. I will work with stakeholders to find the most effective ways to improve that position as quickly as possible.

The evaluation also considers how the district councils have used their new enforcement powers, which were provided in the legislation, to target unfitness and disrepair. That was a primary objective of The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. Careful analysis is needed to determine the need for new or enhanced policy initiatives and, therefore, the need for any subsequent supporting legislation. The motion calls on me to introduce a proposal for

legislation on the regulation of private landlords. When I announced the new housing agenda earlier this year, I made it clear that I wanted to support people to move into the home of their choice.

Increasingly, the private-rented sector is playing a bigger part in meeting housing need, in some cases through choice. However, for more vulnerable people on lower incomes, that is solely because they have no realistic alternative. To respond effectively to that need, the sector needs to be fit for purpose and provide good physical standards of well-managed accommodation. In the private-rented sector, 66% of tenants receive housing benefit. I will explore how that considerable investment could be used to positively influence future landlord behaviour.

The facts in the private-rented sector speak for themselves. The poor perception of life in some parts of that sector appears to be borne out by the level of problems that private-renting tenants experience. Despite the introduction of new laws, evidence from advice services shows that levels of enquiries have remained constant. That clearly points to the need for action to improve the core problems of tenant management, which include rent books and deposits. Furthermore, tenancy agreements are needed to provide confidence against fears of intimidation and unlawful conviction, as well as for repairs and improvement arrangements.

Despite considerable progress in recent years, real problems with unfitness levels remain. The private-rented sector has an older stock profile and, therefore, has greater unfitness and disrepair problems. The 'House Condition Survey 2006' showed that the private-rented sector accounted for a high proportion of Northern Ireland's unfit housing. Security of tenure for tenants in the private-rented sector also remains a fundamental issue, thereby contributing to a lack of confidence.

Furthermore, the tenancy-deposit schemes and dispute-resolution mechanisms are essential, and they will be considered as part of the development of the new strategy for the private-rented sector. Evidence from the South of Ireland's dispute-resolution system suggests that the majority of disputes there concern deposits.

Compared to home ownership, in Northern Ireland, renting is often considered to be, and experienced as, second best. In other countries, that negative opinion of renting does not exist, and, in order to address that, I am determined that unscrupulous actions, wherever they occur, will not be tolerated. Good practice will be promoted throughout the sector, with appropriate support and guidance made available for landlords and tenants.

Previous legislation has gone some way towards challenging some of the difficulties with, and in

delivering tangible improvements to, the quality of private-rented properties. That legislation established better rights for — and has clarified the responsibilities of — people involved in that sector.

The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 strengthened harassment and eviction law in order to prevent unscrupulous landlords from harassing tenants. In addition, it established protections for tenants concerning notice periods, and it places obligations on landlords to provide rent books and written tenancy terms. Furthermore, specific regulations continue to apply to particular tenancies, such as unfit private tenancies, protected and statutory tenancies and houses in multiple occupation.

The regulation of private tenancies on the basis of unfitness addresses a major housing problem that has proven intractable for many years. District councils have been provided with significant additional powers to compel landlords to make properties fit, to carry out necessary repairs, and to ensure that rental income is dramatically reduced while a property remains unfit.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Minister assure the House that having considered this matter, the forthcoming legislation will deal with the problem of unfitness, without extending the existing massive amount of bureaucracy, which is the fear of some Members?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I can assure the House that every angle will be explored.

Protected-tenancy regulations ensure that the important security of tenure that that limited group of tenants enjoys can be safeguarded, while ensuring that rent levels, although higher than equivalent Housing Executive rents, will continue to be subject to statutory limits.

Given the existence of the Landlords Association of Northern Ireland (LANI), it would be wrong to think that all is bad in the private-rented sector, which, as it has grown, has delivered much high-quality accommodation. Not all landlords are the same, and I welcome that fact that many private-sector landlords have formed their own association — LANI — whose aim is to professionalise and drive up standards in the industry. I met that group, and I have instructed officials to engage with it concerning regulatory matters. I believe that that is the first ever structured engagement between Government and the private-rented sector.

A statutory registration scheme operates for houses in multiple occupation, which are of particular concern due to the high levels of health and safety risks that they pose. Arguably, they give rise to a disproportionate amount of antisocial behaviour in local communities. The Housing Executive's registration scheme aims to address those matters and to ensure that non-compliance is tackled effectively.

In the course of the next few months, my officials will meet stakeholders to develop ideas and proposals for an overall strategic framework for the private-rented sector. Increased regulation of private landlords will, of course, be one of the many matters to be addressed, and the outcome of that policy-development exercise will enable me to find strategic solutions that are capable of delivering sustainable improvements in order to effectively, and in a timely manner, tackle those agreed matters in the private-rented sector.

I have heard calls for a mandatory registration scheme for private landlords. However, I remain concerned that that has been proposed as the panacea for the problems in the private-rented sector. My examination of the effectiveness of such schemes in the South of Ireland and in Scotland has not produced a cut-and-dried result. Although there is agreement that such schemes have delivered several benefits — for example, increased knowledge of the scale and spread of the private-rented sector — that has been at a considerable cost and, some three years on, with some debate about the measurable outcomes.

Competing arguments point to alternative and effective approaches that deal with the core problems, such as tenancy deposit schemes, dispute arrangements, better security of tenure and more effective use of housing benefit to drive good practice. I will continue to monitor the impact of those schemes and keep in touch with developments, particularly in Scotland, where a voluntary landlord accreditation scheme is under consideration. Similarly, an evaluation of the scheme in the South of Ireland is ongoing.

As part of the new housing agenda, I am committed to ensuring that everyone in Northern Ireland has access to a decent, affordable home — I believe that all Members want to see that. The private-rented sector has an increasingly important role to play in achieving that, particularly as it provides a home for a diverse range of households. My work to develop a new strategy for the private-rented sector will ensure that priority issues in the sector are dealt with effectively. Subject to the outcome of that work, I am sure that new legislation will be required to give life to the new strategy for the sector. I aim to introduce that in the latter part of 2009-10.

As Members know, a draft housing Bill from my Department is caught in the current logjam at the Executive. I emphasise that the lack of Executive meetings will undoubtedly have a damaging impact on the legislative timetable, and I hope that that does not carry through to my forthcoming second housing Bill, which will regulate —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

The Minister for Social Development: Apologies; I will not give way because I have only a few minutes left.

That Bill will regulate the private-rented sector. I ask the Members who proposed the motion — who belong to the party that is refusing to allow the Executive to meet — to do all in their power to ensure that that legislation does not slip. If those Members genuinely care about, and feel compassion for, people living in the private-rented sector, surely they will not allow this legislation — or any form of legislation that impacts on the social and economic conditions of the people of Northern Ireland — to slip.

I welcome a strong vote of support for the work that I have put in place to improve conditions in the private-rented sector through the development of a strategic framework to ensure that everyone in our society has access to a decent, secure and affordable home. I believe that all Members want to see that happen. I will write to Members individually if I have not answered any issues that were raised.

Ms Purvis: It is unfortunate that some Members choose to expend a lot of energy in scoring points; I urge those Members to use a similar amount of energy in trying to resolve the issues that are preventing the Executive from meeting.

I return to the debate, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to dealing with the issue. I acknowledge the hard work that she and her Department have done, and I look forward to seeing, and commenting on, the proposals when they are published.

The debate was wide-ranging and represented the views of landlords and tenants in the private-rented sector. For many of the reasons that were outlined, there is much interest in the issue. We must improve the management of properties and tenancies by landlords, so legislation is important, and the mandatory registration of landlords is crucial. Many of the core issues were discussed: the fitness of properties; the rights of tenants, which include access to deposits and security of tenure; and safeguards for landlords in relation to absconders and evictions.

However, the primary reason that the legislation is needed is to promote good practice in the private-rented sector. That sector is growing rapidly in Northern Ireland, and we must ensure that it is regulated, for the benefit of tenants and landlords.

1.30 pm

Lord Morrow: Everything that I want to say has been said already, and I agree with what the Minister has said. However, quite frankly, this motion should not have been before the House today. I say that, not because there is not a housing need or a housing crisis — there certainly is. I say it because it seems that the crisis is not yet big enough for Sinn Féin to do what any normal party would do, which is to allow things to move on.

Alban Maginness was correct when he said that tabling the motion was a classic own goal. Sinn Féin is like a rabbit caught in the headlights. In tabling the motion, that party is either not conscious of the fact that everyone sees its members as the fools that they are or it wants to ensure that its members are viewed as such. This issue could be dealt with if Sinn Féin were to allow progress to occur in Northern Ireland.

It is hypocritical — in fact it is a lot of nonsense — for Sinn Féin to ask the House to instruct the Minister to get on with things when it is that party alone that is responsible for telling her that she cannot help because it will not let her do so. Sinn Féin seems to be totally confused today. Its Members must stand up and say what they believe and believe in what they say.

Dawn Purvis has said that this is not the time for point-scoring, and she is absolutely correct. This is not the time for point-scoring: this is the time for getting things done. The blame has got to lie fairly and squarely where it belongs. Sinn Féin is holding up progress and it does not want social-sector housing to be progressed. It feels that it can play politics with people's lives and futures. It is absolutely ridiculous and disgraceful that the Executive cannot meet because Sinn Féin will not allow them to meet.

Sinn Féin is not playing ball because things are not going its way. Its view is that if things are not done its way, it will not allow the Executive to meet. What sort of an agreement did Sinn Féin think that it had signed up to — an agreement based on a Sinn Féin agenda? Of course, that was not the case.

There is a housing crisis in Northern Ireland, and thousands of people are in need of housing urgently. Landlords must be regulated, because not all of them are good landlords. The Assembly has heard today from several Members who are also landlords, and they have protested that they are good landlords, and I accept that. However, not all landlords are good landlords.

Furthermore, there is the problem of serious overcrowding in the private sector. The Minister told us something quite startling today — that private-sector letting is now as large as social-sector letting. The House and the Assembly are charged with a responsibility for addressing those issues.

For how much longer can Sinn Féin sit on its hands? How many more people are going to be in a housing crisis before that party takes action? Its stance is hurting its constituents as much as those represented by other parties. Some of the Members who proposed the motion today represent West Belfast, where, I suspect, there is housing need. There is also housing need in my own town, Dungannon, where literally hundreds of people are waiting to be housed. Those people cannot be helped unless and until the Minister

is given the authority and the opportunity to help. The Minister has been sincere today when she says that she wants to tackle this social issue.

I have been involved in social housing and private-sector housing for the past 30 years. It is appalling that the Assembly is debating a motion that does not need to be debated. This motion is a vain repetition of what happened in the House 12 months ago. Since then, we have not moved forward one inch — all because Sinn Féin wants to play politics with people's futures — *[Interruption.]*

If you want to say something get to your feet. If Sinn Féin were sincere, it would not be tabling motions such as this; it would be going to the Executive table.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Councillor, and MLA, Fra McCann was — rightly — admonished for speaking across the Chamber. The Member opposite is doing likewise, but you have not addressed that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is strange that Members can see faults in others but fail to see faults in themselves. I was sitting in the Chair, and I saw that remarks were being made to and fro across the Chamber. It was coming close to the end of the Member's allocated five minutes, so I allowed him to continue.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will you provide clarity to the House on a technicality? I thought that if both amendments were accepted, both would be carried. I know that you explained it to my colleague earlier, but will you clarify whether the second amendment will fall if the first amendment is successful.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is correct, and I will remind Members of that before the Question on the amendment is put. Amendment No 2 will fall if amendment No 1 is made.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you for that clarification. Sinn Féin regrets that it cannot accept both amendments, and we extend our apologies to Dawn Purvis and the PUP. We accept the sentiments of both amendments, but, judging by the way in which the debate has developed, the DUP amendment will be accepted.

Fra McCann and my colleagues had every right to move the motion, and we will not be chastised by any Member for doing so. There are stark difficulties out there, and, as the Minister said, the private sector is growing to almost the same size as the social sector — if not bigger. With that expansion, the need for mandatory regulation of the sector also increases.

Every Member who has spoken has said that there are good landlords, and that must be recognised. Constituencies such as North Belfast have many

private landlords. I know that there are many good landlords, because I work closely with them. Equally, and unfortunately, there are more landlords who are not so good. In fact, there are a few whom I have never seen in the many years that I have represented my constituency. I welcome the enforcement powers that are emerging from councils, and I will vigorously pursue some of the landlords who, for many intents and purposes, have homes on interfaces. Some landlords have allowed their houses to lie vacant; some have let their houses to families who have extreme social problems, and they are causing all sorts of difficulties. The main thrust of the situation is that mandatory regulation is required.

With regard to Fred Cobain's question about HMOs and private landlords, Fra McCann provided some figures from different councils. However, the statistics and figures relating to many stories have yet to unfold. Registration is voluntary, and it defies logic to expect any unscrupulous landlord to register themselves voluntarily.

I do not agree with the way in which David Simpson moved the DUP amendment. Fra McCann has already said that he accepts the sentiments of the amendment, because he accepts the need to introduce regulation of the sector, and all Members who spoke in the debate agreed. Dawn Purvis's amendment goes further and calls for mandatory registration.

Mr A Maskey: In the Minister for Social Development's response to the debate, she referred to HMOs and the need for registration, and so forth, of other properties. Furthermore, she acknowledged that it might be 2013 before all HMOs are registered, and that further underlines the need for the mandatory regulation and registration of landlords. Such measures will ensure the proper regulation of the sector, as all Members have said is required.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I accept Alex Maskey's comments. Although other Members touched on the issue, I did not realise that the registration of all HMOs will take until 2013; that is worrying.

Dawn Purvis — as well as other Members such as Fra McCann and Mickey Brady — talked about the impact that is left by an unscrupulous landlord. They also mentioned the impact that the allocation of a house to an antisocial family will have on tenants, families and the community in which the house is located. The effects of an absentee landlord were also mentioned.

In my experience, the consequences have always been dire. This system, as outlined by the Housing Rights Service, and sharing the database, will ensure that landlords with a licence, and residents, will have access to the register.

Fred Cobain recognised the work that had been undertaken. Around 11% of the entire housing stock is

privately owned, and 40% of the occupants live in fuel poverty. My experience in North Belfast is that the lack of regulation and registration means that rents have increased, and, in the mouth of a credit crunch, families have to choose whether to pay their rents, heat their homes or eat. Although they were not mentioned, those are the facts — it is not a myth. Those families have to pay rent to landlords on a whim. I know of three families whose housing conditions are very bad; nevertheless, their rents continue to increase. Many Members will have similar stories to tell.

I was, therefore, disappointed with Alban Maginness's contribution — or lack of contribution. However, I am not surprised, considering that he and his party — so-called "champions" and founder members of the civil rights movement — cannot see the principle of demanding a Government of equality and partnership. He too is from North Belfast, and I am disappointed that, although he knows the circumstances in which many of his constituents live, he still makes a cheap political point.

Anna Lo saw that there was a need to recognise the problems of this growing sector. She pointed out that some HMOs have so many living in them that they are becoming a health and safety problem. Furthermore, deregulation has meant that people, their rents, and their housing conditions are all vulnerable. We may have to wait until 2013 before the situation is rectified, and the main thrust of moving the motion was to bring that forward. We understand that proposals may be introduced in March 2009, but it is incumbent on us to ensure that the issue is raised, particularly since we have not seen any real development.

Jonathan Craig pointed out the lack of public- and private-sector housing, and he is correct. I pointed out that there are good and bad landlords and other Members referred to that fact. I welcome the fact that he supports the registration.

Mickey Brady was disappointed with David Simpson's contribution, as he had dealt with the issue himself. However, a scheme is needed to deal with the needs of the private-rented sector.

I welcome the fact that all Members who spoke, regardless of the points they were trying to make, have not argued against the registration.

Michelle McIlveen — another good landlord from the DUP — also welcomed registration, and that appears to be the cross-party view.

In answer to a question raised by Fra McCann in May, the Minister outlined that mandatory registration was not a panacea for the problems, and she reiterated that throughout her remarks. That was one reason that Sinn Féin proposed the motion. It may not be a panacea. However, it is incumbent on us to ensure that we do all in our power to raise the standard of living

by introducing legislation for regulation, particularly for those people in the private sector who find — even as we speak — that costs are rising.

The issue will be on the list of no-day-named motions, with no changes. That, too, is our prerogative. Whether there will be support from other Whips to have the motion selected will be a story for a different day. However, today's motion garnered the support of all of the Whips; therefore, I am disappointed to hear some point-scoring from some petty individuals in the House who cannot, for some reason, embrace the sentiments of equality and partnership in Government to which they signed up in the Programme for Government.

However, I am delighted that those Members support the motion. Sinn Féin is happy to support both amendments.

1.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I put the Question, I again remind Members of procedure so that they are absolutely clear. If amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I will then put the Question on the motion, as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the intention of the Minister for Social Development to bring forward legislation to regulate private landlords; and calls on the Minister to ensure that these regulations will tackle unfitness in the sector, whilst ensuring that unnecessary bureaucracy is avoided.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wanted to raise this issue before the vote was held, but I could not, so I will do so now. During the debate, several Members declared an interest as landlords. What is the position as regards those who voted on the motion? Other Members may have voted today but have not declared that they are landlords, good or bad, which is a subjective interpretation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is a requirement on those who speak in a debate to declare any relevant interest. Other Members will have declared their interests in the Register of Members' Interests.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (POCVA)

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the waiting time for POCVA checks to be processed; further notes that this is adversely affecting child care centres, amongst other employers; and asks the Secretary of State to investigate the situation and ensure that applications are processed as a matter of urgency.

Aa' hae mien weel wi clarity tha dae wee Holly en Jessica wur funn. An aa' hae mien o'prayin that we wud niver wutness tha saem thing hapnen in tha Proavince. Aa' em abreest o' tha raisins that these searches an checks er in place an aa' want it tae be weel kent that aa' whael heertidly agree that ticht checks hiss' tae be keeried oot. Tha mettar whut kinsarns me maist, is tha tiem it takks fer tae keery oot thees checks.

I remember with chilling clarity the day that little Holly and Jessica were found, and I remember praying that we would never see the same thing happen in the Province. I am well aware of the reasons for carrying out searches and checks, and I want to it to be well understood that I agree wholeheartedly that such stringent checks must be carried out. However, my issue is with the length of time that it currently takes to carry them out.

Access Northern Ireland was established on 1 April 2008, following the enablement of part V of the Police Act 1997 in Northern Ireland. Until that point, Northern Ireland was the only part of the United Kingdom not to have commenced part V, which created a legal framework for the disclosure of information relating to an individual and their suitability for employment for a range of purposes.

Three levels of disclosure certificate are available: basic, standard, and enhanced. Each certificate contains different levels of information and checks. The legislation created a statutory code for the police to disclose criminal record information and provide relevant non-conviction data relating to an individual's prospective employment or voluntary work with children or vulnerable adults.

An enhanced disclosure certificate is used for positions involving children and vulnerable adults, and it also involves checks on disqualification lists, such as those held by the Department of Health, Social

Services and Public Safety under the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order (Northern Ireland) 2003 and, in the education field, under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Where an individual has a previous GB address, checks are made against UK police forces' criminal record information and disqualification lists held in Scotland, such as the list held under the Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003.

Shortly after the commencement of the legislation, it became clear to all elected representatives that there were serious delays in the production of enhanced disclosures. I am not condemning those who created the new system. Many factors — such as time of year, business processes, and growing awareness and use of vetting checks — combined to play a part in causing delays.

However, the process must be quickened. Indeed, Paul Goggins, the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, accepted that in a press release that he issued following the agency's failure to meet published performance standards of the production of 90% of enhanced disclosure certificates within four weeks. We are all aware that it can take between 10 and 12 weeks for checks to take place. Such huge waiting times cause practical difficulties. Paul Goggins also stated on 30 October 2007, in response to a question for written answer from my colleague Sammy Wilson, that 6,095 vetting checks were being processed and that 16,145 checks were made in September 2007. Demand is great, and the need for the process to be speeded up is equally great.

Say, for example, that a nursery school in my area advertises for new staff at the beginning of June. The nursery subsequently hires a girl and tells her that she can begin work as soon as the check to be carried out on her is complete. However, a month, then five weeks, passes and still nothing has arrived. The girl begins to think that if she is not going to be able to work at the nursery school, she may have to look for another job, because not many people can afford not to work for a month. Six weeks pass and the prospective employee has to seek alternative employment. The nursery school must then begin the entire recruitment process again. In the time that has elapsed, the school has to turn children away because they do not have enough staff. It is a double whammy — the school has lost money and parents have lost the option of placing their child in the day-care facility.

I declare an interest as a Member of Ards Borough Council. Ards Borough Council had to cancel summer schemes. The council advertised for staff in May and put the applications that it received through the POCVA vetting process. However, the checks were only being cleared in August. That was too late for the summer scheme, because the summer was over. The

council's investment and the young people's enjoyment had been lost. That situation is mirrored in playgroups and nursery groups throughout the Ards Borough Council area.

The constant delays have a domino effect. We often encourage mothers to get back into work, and, indeed, the perks of part-time positions can be considerable. However, how can we expect mothers to work if they have nowhere to place their child? Throughout the summer, staff at day-care centres relayed their anxieties to me about not being able to accommodate children because of huge delays in the staff-vetting process. At one stage, five childcare providers in my constituency — who look after a total of more than 150 children — were awaiting a response from Access Northern Ireland. The system took far too long and failed to deliver. Some people must wait 10 to 12 weeks for clearance. An increasingly large number of checks has to be processed every year: more than 130,000 checks had to be performed in 2005; more than 150,000 in 2006; and more than 180,000 in 2007.

The delays are unacceptable and adversely affect businesses throughout the province. It is not only the realm of childcare that has been affected. The Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had to establish an emergency, temporary procedure to comply with the POCVA requirements. Legislation for nursing homes was amended, yielding the Establishments and Agencies (Fitness of Workers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008. Those regulations permit employment in areas that were already covered by legislation, pending receipt of an enhanced disclosure certificate from Access Northern Ireland and subject to a range of safeguards being adhered to, including appropriate supervision of a new worker for the period that an enhanced disclosure is outstanding. The emergency legislation and temporary relaxation of requirements was necessary to facilitate vital establishments' recruitment of adequate staff numbers. The delays have put residential homes, nursing homes and children's homes at risk. The Ministers concerned did well to enact legislation to ensure continuity while people awaited checks to be carried out on them.

However, those small-business owners did not have the knowledge or the ability that were required in order to put in place measures that would ensure the survival of their businesses.

After the Soham murders, Government passed the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 and, in Northern Ireland, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. That legislation is designed to deal with some of the deficiencies that were identified by the Richd Inquiry. The legislation is particularly designed to address the system of

vetting checks in order to ensure that a range of bodies share relevant information.

The 2006 Act established a new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which administrates new automatic barring arrangements on people who have certain convictions for harming children or vulnerable adults. The ISA also has discretionary barring powers in relation to individuals who have engaged in certain behaviour or pose a risk to children and vulnerable adults.

The new arrangements are novel, in that they introduce a continuous monitoring element for those who are admitted to the scheme. The 2006 Act and 2007 Order introduce a range of requirements for posts in which individuals must be a member of the vetting and the barring scheme. Individuals may use membership of the new scheme for other posts. Therefore, it is much more portable and, ultimately, efficient, than the present check.

Parents who make private family arrangements and who wish to check on an individual's barred status may do so. That provides an extra safeguard in an area that falls outside the existing legislation. The ISA will also maintain the two Northern Ireland lists of barred people — the children and vulnerable adults lists.

We must ensure that the present delays are not repeated when the new scheme commences in October 2009, at which time all applications to the vetting and barring scheme will be handled. For example, while non-child-related care organisations in the community and voluntary sector may at present obtain a vetting check, it is vitally important that problems faced by Access Northern Ireland are resolved by the Northern Ireland Office before the implementation of the scheme in October 2009. At that point, and for the following five years, a substantial increase in applications is likely to create worse problems.

In conclusion, the checks must be thorough and all-encompassing in order to ensure the safety of all vulnerable children and adults. However, the system in place on the mainland is a better one and one that the Secretary of State must ensure is introduced and is running smoothly in the Province by this time next year.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and I commend the proposer of the motion for securing it. I will not go back over a lot of the issues and the key facts that he has covered. However, the protection of children and vulnerable adults is an issue that the Assembly must take seriously, and has taken seriously over recent years. Supporting this motion in no way dilutes the Assembly's commitment or record on promoting the protection of children and vulnerable adults. I am conscious that people who follow this debate may

consider that a backward rather than a forward step is being taken. That is not what is intended.

I agree with Jim Shannon that the issue of the proper protection of children and vulnerable adults is at stake. I share the concern about AccessNI; I wrote to NIO Minister Paul Goggins around 10 days ago requesting a meeting. I sit on two Committees at which our own Ministers have dealt with some of the issues that relate to the backlog of 20,000 applications awaiting AccessNI clearance. With that in mind, my colleague Michelle O'Neill and I have asked Paul Goggins for reassurance that there will be no return to the bad old days.

As Jim Shannon said, AccessNI was established in April and created a legal framework for disclosure among all relevant Departments about individuals and their suitability for employment. However, it became clear that there were serious delays, and a review of AccessNI was ordered.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to send a record of this debate to the NIO Minister. He said that the review would be completed by September, and it is now the first two weeks of October. I am sorry if I caught you off guard there, Mr Deputy Speaker.

2.00 pm

A copy of today's Hansard report should be sent to Paul Goggins, and we should ask him for a copy of the review that he said would be completed in September, because that delay has meant several things. First, it has meant that people applying for jobs have had to wait for months for their security checks to be processed. Secondly, it has meant that groups are going to the wall because they do not have the suitable people in post, and, thirdly, it has meant that some groups have had to operate at a reduced capacity.

As Jim Shannon rightly pointed out, people applying for jobs wait for so long that they start to face financial difficulties — everyone has bills to pay — and they have to find employment elsewhere. That creates a shortfall, as the best person for the job has moved on because they cannot afford to wait any longer. As a result, the vulnerable adults and children whom we talk about protecting are losing out a second time round. Therefore, we need to address the matter.

I wish to take the opportunity to commend our Ministers. It is important that we do that, because some Departments are directly affected by the waiting time for checks to be processed. In order to deal with the mess, the Departments have decided to introduce emergency legislation to begin to deal with the 20,000 people on the waiting list. I do not want to politicise the issue, but if policing and justice were devolved, we would have access to our own local, accountable Minister. We could meet that Minister in the corridor and tell him or her about the mess and the need to sort it out.

I commend our Ministers, but they are merely introducing temporary legislation; it is only for the interim period, which means that applicants will still have to wait for the enhanced disclosure certificate.

Mr McLaughlin: I join my colleague in supporting and congratulating Ministers on their efforts to address the issue, but does she agree that a consistent approach across all the Departments is required? For example, the Department of Education does not require applicants who have been through the vetting process, been accredited and been in continuous employment to reapply if they wish to change posts. That simple measure would make a significant contribution to reducing the mammoth backlog.

Ms S Ramsey: As the proposer of the motion highlighted, the change in arrangements came about as a result of the brutal murders in Soham. It is striking that one organisation held relevant information that could have stopped the murderer from getting a job, but none of the organisations talked to each other. I agree with the Member — if people go through a POCVA check, that information must be spread to other organisations to stop the backlog.

When we talk about 20,000 people, we are talking about community and voluntary groups, individuals, schools and councils. All their projects have been put on the back-burner because of the backlog. The NIO must spell out to us how it plans to resolve the problem. Paul Goggins gave a commitment to the Committee for Employment and Learning and to the Health Committee that the matter would be sorted out by the end of the year. Did he mean the end of this year, the end of the calendar year, or the end of the financial year? We need to ask those questions.

As Jim Shannon said, unless the matter is sorted out now, the new legislation that is due to come into operation in October 2009 will make matters worse. I wholeheartedly support the motion, but the NIO must answer a lot of questions, so I would appreciate the Assembly sending a copy of today's Hansard report to Paul Goggins. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Kennedy: I broadly support the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party welcomed the introduction of the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order in 2003. It is of paramount importance that we do everything possible to protect our children and vulnerable adults from potential predatory individuals or groups in our society. Therefore, the registration measures and the checks that are undertaken under the regulations are undeniably necessary. However, there appears to be a contradiction in introducing legislation while not providing the level of services and support needed to implement it without a detrimental effect on those whom we are trying to protect. Under the current

operation of the legislation, children in care centres and people who benefit from certain community and voluntary groups are suffering due to an inability to register and, therefore, employ or utilise the necessary people.

We cannot, and should not, tolerate such a situation.

Voluntary and community groups are experiencing long delays in receiving information from AccessNI. We are all aware of the resulting significant staffing problems for groups that are carrying out vital work with children and vulnerable adults. AccessNI has been unable to cope with the level of applications that has risen sharply in recent years. It has been reported that after only six weeks after submission, groups are still waiting for their applications to appear on the AccessNI system, with no further information available about the length of time that it will take to process those applications.

I recognise that Minister of State Goggins has taken steps to ease the situation in the short term for certain groups. However, that is not a long-term solution, and it cannot help organisations providing services such as personal care, one-to-one counselling or services in clients' homes. As we try to tackle child poverty, as we increasingly recognise the importance and the benefits of early interventions on educational and social outcomes, and as we try to address mental-health problems, it is unacceptable that AccessNI continues to fail. Mr Goggins, the Minister of State with responsibility for criminal justice, has, at least, recognised the problem, but he should be under no illusion that the steps he has taken in an attempt to get back on track have so far been inadequate and appear not to be working.

Further to the current problems, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 will come into effect in October 2009 and will introduce new safeguarding arrangements across the United Kingdom. AccessNI remains the gateway to the new system for employees to be registered with the new independent safeguarding authority. Therefore, it is crucial that we remove the current problems well in advance of the introduction of the new legislation.

The Ulster Unionist Party pledges its complete support for the new regulations. However, we must have an agency that has the capacity to thoroughly and efficiently process the applications that it receives. That means that it must have adequate resources and systems in place to achieve that outcome. I urge the Secretary of State to investigate the situation and ensure that applications are processed as a matter of urgency. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tréaslaím leis na Comhaltaí a thug an rún os comhair an Tí inniu. I thank the Members who

tabled the motion. We must all be careful to state from the outset that our principal concern must be the protection of children and vulnerable adults. We must be careful that nothing that we say, propose or suggest today in any way endangers children or vulnerable adults. Other Members have mentioned that, and I appreciate it.

Having said that, we must have an effective and efficient system that ensures the protection of children and vulnerable adults, and which does not reproduce the long delays caused by the previous system — delays that have been inherited by Access Northern Ireland, and which are, as we have heard, causing major difficulties for childcare facilities.

I have been working with several organisations, including Irish-medium preschool groups, which are awaiting clearance for staff members.

In one case, if clearance is not received for a new nursery assistant, a number of children will have to be turned away. It is somewhat ironic that a system that should be working to protect children is actually denying them places in educational and childcare facilities. There is something not quite right about a system that produces that type of result.

The POCVA checks are not the only measures in the system to protect children and young people, as has been pointed out in the letter of easement that was sent by the Department of Education and the Department of Health. I welcome the easement that has been offered by those Departments. That will, no doubt, help the situation but, in the meantime, there is still a need to clear the current backlog as quickly as possible, to ensure the required effectiveness and efficiency of the system to protect children and vulnerable adults, and also to ensure that educational, health, childcare and community facilities can continue to operate without disruption, and without the exclusion of some of those they exist to serve. It is possible to establish a system that does both, that carries out the necessary checks, and does so within a sensible time frame.

We have been told that the backlog faced by Access Northern Ireland will be cleared by Christmas — it will have to be. The patience of employees and employers is wearing thin, and that is not surprising. I have spoken mostly of difficulties concerning education, but there are obvious implications for nursing and care homes, where understaffing is becoming a problem due to the lack of clearance through the system. The impact of that situation could have very serious implications for healthcare, if not dealt with post-haste.

Access Northern Ireland must ensure that its systems work to full capacity to clear the backlog in the shortest possible time. We have been told that it will be cleared by Christmas. I sincerely hope that, when Christmas arrives, Access Northern Ireland will

not tell us that the deadline has slipped to Easter. We need an efficient and effective service, without the unacceptable delays that are occurring at present. If those delays are not dealt with, they will continue into the phase of the new legislation, and that will mean continued difficulties, even under new circumstances.

Gabhaim buíochas, mar a dúirt mé, leis na Comhaltaí a mhol an rún seo. Tá mé féin agus mo pháirtí ar son an rúin, agus tá súil agam go mbeidh fuascailt ann don fhadhb seo gan mórán moille agus go mbeidh sé ar chumas na n-eagraíochtaí atá thíos leis an mhoill seo oibriú a fháil gan a thuilleadh moille. A LeasCheann Comhairle, aontaím leis an rún agus gabhaim buíochas leat. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs Long: I thank Jim Shannon and his colleagues for proposing the motion. We are all agreed that appropriate protections must be in place for children and vulnerable adults. Those measures must be effective and robust, but they must also be efficiently administered, and adequate capacity and resources must be committed in order to make that happen. Otherwise, children and vulnerable adults will be deprived of services that they desperately need. That has been the failure of the current system to date.

The NIO issued a statement in the last week or so, as I am sure Members are aware, outlining the action that it has been taking to try to tackle the backlog, and to deal with issues in respect of employment, and so on, in the interim, along with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

When I met the Minister a few weeks ago and raised the issue with him, he said that the clearance process was currently taking around 10 weeks from start to finish. That contrasts with what was expected: that 90% of applications for a basic check would be completed in two weeks; 90% of applications for a standard check would be completed in three weeks; and that 90% of applications for an enhanced check would be completed within four weeks.

Nineteen extra staff have been employed to try to bring the processing time back down to four weeks by December. That demonstrates how far the NIO had underestimated the volume of work that AccessNI would receive. That is cautionary tale for when the regulations are implemented towards the end of 2009. There should be further assessment of the resources that are required so that the process functions properly.

2.15 pm

Undoubtedly, the teething problems experienced by AccessNI contributed to the backlog. However, there is anecdotal evidence that, in the past 18 months, the processing time for applications had been gradually increasing and that, before AccessNI was established, it was about six weeks. There are no statistics to support that assertion, but that is the feedback that I

have received. Therefore, there is an underlying difficulty that must be addressed.

All youth leaders, volunteers, teachers and other people who work with children must undergo checks. Those people must undergo a separate check for each organisation in which they work, which has contributed significantly to the amount of applications — often, multiple applications are being processed for one person. I raised the issue of joined-up thinking in the arrangements with AccessNI, because, if someone has already been cleared to work with young people in one organisation and wants to work with young people in another organisation, they have to reapply. In its response, AccessNI said that the checks were valid only at the point at which the certificate was issued, which raises questions about continuity in the system and how information that arises after someone has been checked is fed back to the organisation for which that person works.

Members have correctly focused on those involved in childcare centres and in other paid employment with children and vulnerable adults, because the waiting time has a direct implication on their earning capacity. Many people in the voluntary sector who, like me, volunteer in organisations such as the Guides, Scouts and many others have been affected. Churches that provide valuable diversionary activities for young people have also been affected by the delays in the processing of applications. There is a timing issue, because the problems with AccessNI coincided with summer activities, such as the local council summer schemes that Jim Shannon mentioned. However, the backlog has stretched into the autumn session of many of the voluntary youth organisations, and it is affecting them.

Mr B McCrea: As the Member is broadening the scope, she may be interested to learn that a body as august as the PSNI had difficulty getting an entire cohort of trainee officers through the checks. That highlights how widespread the problem is. Will the Member agree that it is important for people to realise what the checks consist of? At a basic level, the checks are no more than people saying that they are who they say they are. We must get the process right and invest the appropriate resources.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his intervention. As I am being allowed to speak beyond my five minutes, I assume that I have been given extra time to respond. I agree entirely with the Member: there must be clarity. However, the AccessNI website does not offer that clarity; it is very unclear on what a basic check entails. Most organisations that undertake basic checks think that, at the very least, there has been a check against an individual's police records, but that is not the case. That raises serious questions about the robustness of the system in the minds of those who use it to try to protect young people. I hope that the

legislation addresses those questions. AccessNI could help the situation by providing more detailed information on certain issues.

There is a serious issue about allowing people —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Mrs Long: The vast majority of those who work with young people and vulnerable adults do so for the right reasons. It is important that the checks are robust so that those who might abuse their position are not allowed to do so.

Mr G Robinson: The delays in completing the appropriate background checks, and the temporary measures to reduce those delays, could expose the most vulnerable people in society to an unnecessary risk. That is a concern for my party and me.

Continuity of care can be guaranteed only by ensuring that there is a readily available pool of suitably qualified employees to fill those vacancies.

I know of care homes and childcare facilities that are unable to maximise their operating capacity due to a lack of staff, partly as a result of the lengthy wait for confirmation of an applicant's suitability to work in such an environment. I have been told that many people who applied for work in those sectors found employment elsewhere before the required checks were completed and clearance to work given, thereby creating an additional recruitment problem. The only way to rectify that situation is to have a process that is quick, accurate and ensures ease of recruitment for employers.

These delays have an adverse impact on prospective employees and employers. It is totally unacceptable for those such as teachers, classroom assistants, taxi drivers and bus drivers seeking jobs in childcare provision, nursing homes and residential homes to be held back from employment due to delays in background checks. Those areas of employment need staff, and need them quickly. There are advertisements for jobs in some of those sectors every week in the local press. I appreciate that the necessary approval will take longer for people who are applying for work but are not UK-born. However, a means must be found in order to speed up that process, too.

The delays that people are experiencing are denying the sectors that look after the most vulnerable in society the care and security that they need.

Mr B McCrea: With regard to the Member's point about people from outside the UK: is he aware that it is almost impossible to file checks, that there is no way of doing so legally, and, given that we have a land border, that that is a significant loophole in the system?

Mr G Robinson: I agree entirely with the Member.

Delays in checks are hampering employers and, it seems, are making people apply for employment outside the sector.

The Secretary of State may well not wish to examine the current ridiculous and deplorable situation. If he does not, however, that is a reflection on his commitment, rather than this Assembly's, to changing the system for the better. I urge the Secretary of State to hold an urgent inquiry into the problems that are being experienced, and to ensure that recommendations presented as a result of such an inquiry are treated as a priority for implementation.

I support the motion, and commend Mr Shannon for bringing it to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion. The main issues and problems that surround POCVA have been dealt with by Jim Shannon, Sue Ramsey and other Members. There is absolutely no doubt that people who work with children and vulnerable adults need to be properly vetted. That is essential. However, it is the logistics of carrying that out, and particularly the time taken, that is causing a huge problem. The problem is ongoing, affecting potential employers and employees.

Naomi Long spoke about anecdotal evidence. In 2007, I dealt with a case concerning a local crèche where, because of the delays involved in workers being vetted, the employer was on the verge of having to close down, thereby losing the employer's livelihood and several much-needed jobs.

It was hoped that the advent of Access Northern Ireland would go some way to solving the problem. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Immediate priority must be given to the whole area of POCVA; there must not be a half-hearted attempt to try to resolve the problem. A figure of 20,000-plus delays was mentioned, and that that would be sorted out by Christmas. With the best will in the world, however, that is unlikely to happen.

A point that was raised, and which needs to be reinforced, is that a POCVA check does not carry-over from one employer to the next, even if the period is just a few weeks.

Recently, I dealt with a case in which someone had received a POCVA certificate from the Southern Education and Library Board. Two weeks later, that person got a job in a playschool. Social services insisted that the individual go through the entire process again. In that case, the employer was placed under severe pressure because of staff shortages. That situation has continued.

I live in a border constituency. Obviously, workers in the area travel back and forth a lot. Perhaps an all-island approach to POCVA checks should be taken. People

move from social-services jobs in the North to similar jobs in the South, and vice versa. As so many different types of jobs are involved, the entire area of POCVA checks has become complicated. A simple solution is for a centralised body to deal with those checks.

I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins 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 Iris Robinson.

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

Economic Downtown/Credit Crunch

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it has met with the Minister for Finance and Personnel to discuss the implications for the economy of the economic downturn and the credit crunch. (AQO 579/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): Unfortunately, it is apparent that the economic downturn and the credit crunch are not fleeting events; their effects are likely to endure, and the crisis may deepen even further. We continue to experience falling property prices coupled with high inflation, food and fuel prices.

That challenge can only be managed effectively at Executive level. I have discussed the implications of the economic downturn with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on several occasions. On 18 September, I met ministerial colleagues, including Minister Dodds, to discuss those issues.

Additionally, the deputy First Minister and I have met 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 those, we have drawn on advice and information across ministerial portfolios.

The deputy First Minister and I intend that addressing cost-of-living pressures should become a key item of Executive business, to ensure that we collectively address the problem across the full width of Government.

Mr McCallister: Have the First Minister and the Executive identified which programmes at the bottom of the Executive's priorities will be sacrificed first if the Government's peak income targets are not realised because of the economic downturn and the credit crunch?

The First Minister: Capital budgets and current expenditure must be considered. There could be an impact on the capital expenditure if, for instance, land and property sales were to provide less income than previously expected.

Significant increases in revenue costs can also have implications. Each Minister and Department will have to manage those issues. During the course of the monitoring rounds, they will acquaint the Finance Minister with the pressures that they are under, and he will attempt — by using underspend — to meet the pressures in the system.

Mr Gallagher: Has the First Minister raised concerns with Department of Finance and Personnel about the successful legal challenge to the Central Procurement Directorate over the way in which public contracts are awarded to private-sector contractors —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that supplementary questions must relate to the original question. The Member is straying beyond the remit of the original question. By all means, he should ask his supplementary question, but try to relate it to the original question.

The First Minister: I caught the gist of the Member's supplementary question.

I have not spoken to the Finance Minister about the issue, but I have spoken to the chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) about it. The Member will be aware that two legal challenges have been made, concerning systems and procedures in procurement policy. We are considering whether it is appropriate to appeal those decisions: that is being done within the Finance Department. The other option is to move to more conventional means of procurement.

Mr Ford: I appreciate what the First Minister has just said, but it seems to me that there are two issues. First, what discussions has his Office, or any part of the Executive, had with the banks with regard to support for the business sector — especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — given the difficulty that we currently have in attracting external investment? Secondly, given what he is saying about procurement and the complete shortage of private finance, how does he propose to go about conventional means of procurement in the current economic climate?

The First Minister: First, the deputy First Minister and I have had a meeting, not just with the banks, but with the other lending institutions in Northern Ireland. There was a readiness and a willingness on their part to lend money, and they indicated to us that they had money to lend. In present circumstances it is obvious that they may be more careful about their requirements before they lend money.

The big issue is the building of confidence because, until last night at least, the banks were not lending money even to each other. That must be freed up, and steps have been taken internationally. It is a global problem, and the role that we have is only on the edges, particularly with the banks and lending institutions. We have done everything that we can to

encourage them to get the system moving and to ensure that money flows within Northern Ireland.

Secondly, regarding the Member's question on procurement policy, the Executive have identified in their 10-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland, an average of £2 billion per year of capital spend in the public sector. That funding came directly from HM Treasury. In the present economic climate, therefore, that should remain unaffected. It becomes important that we roll out, perhaps in an accelerated fashion, the public spend that we are planning. Using conventional means might just be a method of bringing that out more expeditiously.

Economic Difficulties

2. Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps the Executive is taking to deal with the present economic difficulties. (AQO 570/09)

The First Minister: Even now, it is unlikely that we have seen the full scale of the current economic crisis. The intensity of the storm and the damage that it brings in its wake appears to travel between markets. The main focus of attention has recently shifted back to the banking sector. The remedial action that was announced last week by Governments and central banks across the world is to be welcomed.

Locally, Executive Ministers have been working to mitigate the worst effects of the economic slowdown on our business sector, local people and especially on those members of society who are in greatest need. The welfare of the people of Northern Ireland is our primary concern. In that respect, we have already acted, and we intend to do more. Members will know that this year's regional rate increase for domestic property has been frozen, and that will be maintained for the next two years. As a result of the decisions that the Executive have taken on the regional rate and water charges, the average household will be almost £1,000 better off over this year and the next two years. Executive Ministers have also flagged our intention to look again at the options for a further deferment of the introduction of water charges.

The Minister for Regional Development has announced the extension of the free bus pass scheme. Since 2007, some 240,000 people aged 65 or over have been taking advantage of free bus and rail services. From 1 October, a further 90,000 individuals aged 60 to 64 will be entitled to free travel in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has brought forward proposals to cut the cost of a prescription in Northern Ireland to £3 in January 2009, and for prescriptions to be free of charge by April 2010.

The Department for Social Development has also initiated schemes to promote affordable homes.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) will continue the provision of its successful face-to-face debt advice service to citizens for the next three years. On 25 September, DETI also announced a package worth £5 million to help Invest Northern Ireland's clients to weather the economic slowdown.

Furthermore, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Social Development have announced an increase of £400,000 to the warm homes scheme budget to fund energy-efficiency improvements for rural homes. We have also indicated our intention to address the proposals put forward by the fuel poverty task force and the equal pay issue inherited from the previous Administrations. The latter alone would represent almost 1% of our whole GDP, or the equivalent of around 2,000 jobs in our economy.

The deputy First Minister and I intend to meet the Strategic Investment Board to review the planned roll-out of our capital programme and to assess the opportunities for supporting the local construction industry. It is widely acknowledged that, used intelligently, our public expenditure plans can provide some resilience to the local economy. Members can be assured that the Executive will do all in their power to protect the interests of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive answer. He is well aware that the construction industry — one of the crucial sectors of the economy — is under particular pressure, with estimates of thousands of job losses by Christmas, and evidence already of job losses at the raw-materials end of the sector. The First Minister has already mentioned this matter in a previous answer, but can he outline exactly how those major public infrastructure projects can be rolled out and accelerated as quickly as possible to give a boost to that important sector?

The First Minister: The Member is right. During the latter part of last week, I received an email that indicated that around 25% of jobs in the aggregates sector had already been lost, with the fear that more job losses were to come before the end of the year. If that part of the construction industry is being so affected, one cannot help but conclude that the same impact will be felt elsewhere.

Representatives from the construction industry met the deputy First Minister and myself some weeks ago, and we considered a series of possibilities, one of which was the acceleration of the capital-spend programme that I referred to in my answer to Mr Ford. It is worth pointing out that that programme is more substantial than has ever been the case in Northern Ireland's

history, and it is a programme that could go a long way to making the difference.

The construction industry was keen to be provided with a long-term vision of what measures will come on stream so that it can be involved in the planning process. We have been in touch with the Scottish and Welsh Executives and, by and large, the steps that they are examining are in line with the decisions that we have taken in various Departments: reshaping our capital spending; adjusting the planning and regulatory environment to help individuals and businesses; targeting support at the most vulnerable individuals and businesses; and alleviating the effects of rising energy prices and promoting energy efficiency.

Those are the four key drivers on which the Executive can have an impact. We can have very little impact on the wider global economy and the issues that flow from that, but I have outlined the issues affecting Northern Ireland in respect of which a local hand can make a difference.

Mrs Long: The First Minister raised the issue of what the Executive were doing to alleviate the effects of the present economic difficulties on the most vulnerable people in the community. Can he offer us an estimation of when the anti-poverty strategy will be adopted by the Executive, so that a long-term view can be taken on all of those matters?

The First Minister: I am sure that the Executive will want to look at that matter very closely during their meeting on Thursday.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: I hope that that meeting takes place. It is, in my view, essential that we get down to business, and that business gets done. I was before the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and those matters were referred to. There is no foot dragging, either on the part of the deputy First Minister or myself, in respect of that strategy. My ministerial colleagues will want to give their approval to the strategy, and I look forward to that happening.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the emphasis placed by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on bringing forward capital-spend projects to help the construction industry. Given the current global economic crisis, has the First Minister met the Taoiseach, the British Prime Minister, or other leaders within the European Union, to make suggestions and to bring forward proposals? If so, what has been the substance of those meetings?

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister and I met the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and we talked about a series of financial matters. Later this

week, I intend to meet the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, and I look forward to that engagement.

2.45 pm

Utility Regulator

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of its recent meeting with the Utility Regulator.

(AQO 581/09)

The First Minister: It is clear that the credit crunch, coupled with an increased global demand for oil, has had a profound effect on the price of electricity and gas. The responsibility for energy policy lies primarily with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, in one of a series of meetings on the cost of living, on 24 September 2008, the deputy First Minister and I met the Utility Regulator followed by representatives of Northern Ireland's energy sector. A range of issues concerning the local energy market was discussed, and the deputy First Minister and I gained further understanding of how the energy sector operates. The Utility Regulator agreed to send us some further ideas to explore, about how to mitigate the hardship caused by increasing energy prices. The potential for renewable energy to play a bigger role in the future supply chain was also discussed. It was a constructive meeting about a complex issue.

In separate meetings with local energy companies, it was clear that they are conscious of the price differential that has opened up between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. They too agreed to consider, and submit ideas on, what steps the Assembly could take to ease the burden of high energy prices.

Mr B McCrea: I am pleased that the Utility Regulator has decided to submit some ideas.

Will the First Minister agree that energy policy is integral to any future economic policy? The price of energy is important; it is the bottom line for many people, and it is at the heart of competitiveness. Will he accept, therefore, that it is OFMDFM's role to develop a strategic energy policy? If so, does he have such a policy, and what is it?

The First Minister: Had the Member been in the House during the previous mandate of the Assembly, he would know that energy policy was originally in the remit of the Department for Regional Development for which I was the Minister. His leader strongly argued that the policy should be transferred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. He is, therefore, at odds with his leader. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr McLaughlin: I remind the First Minister of the letter that he received at the start of September from

the deputy First Minister. One of several proposals to deal with fuel poverty included in that letter was the possibility of repatriating the VAT windfalls that accrue to the British Treasury. Will the First Minister confirm that he raised that possibility at his recent meeting with Gordon Brown?

The First Minister: My recollection is that the deputy First Minister raised several such issues during the meeting with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The Assembly must consider providing an overall package to assist the people of Northern Ireland. There is no simple switch to flick that will suddenly make the situation better. The crisis will remain with us for some considerable time and, therefore, a co-ordinated, long-term approach is required.

I do not object to asking people for assistance, but that is not enough. The Assembly has power over mechanisms that can be used to alleviate some of the difficulties that people are experiencing, and should not, therefore, rely solely on others.

Dr McDonnell: Will the First Minister agree that people are becoming increasingly bewildered by how rising oil prices pushed up electricity prices but falling oil prices have no effect on bringing them down? In that context, will he accept that the commissioned review of the process of setting electricity tariffs will have little or no effect on price? The review will assess how the tariffs were set rather than change the price of electricity.

The First Minister: People are right to wonder about that conundrum. However, a further conundrum is that Northern Ireland has gas-fired, not oil-fired, power stations. Therefore, the price of oil should not be the key factor. It is important that the Utility Regulator and the Assembly deal with several issues. The review was set up as a result of a request from the deputy First Minister to the Utility Regulator, who, in turn, has appointed Douglas McIlldoon to carry it out. It is important to use his experience and cross-check the fairness of current prices.

Ms Purvis: The House recognises the need for an overall package to tackle the issues. Electricity and gas produced profits of over £14 million for the gas company and over £81 million for the electricity company. Given that, what discussion took place during the Minister's meeting with the Utility Regulator about reducing those companies' profit margins?

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister and I raised that point — as did some of our advisers — with the Utility Regulator, which argued — and do not pin it on me — that the profits are required in order to fund further research and further capital investment in the industry. Therefore, that profit level is considered necessary. It will be interesting to discover whether Douglas McIlldoon agrees with that assertion.

Maze Site

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the development of the Maze site. (AQO 638/09)

The First Minister: The proposed Maze/Long Kesh development is the largest and most complex project to be considered in recent years. Everyone has a major interest in ensuring that the lands at Maze/Long Kesh are used to benefit the entire community.

The extensive programme to demolish buildings and structures is almost complete. A first phase of substantial remediation work, which will remove contamination — such as diesel oil spillages — at part of the site, is almost complete, and we hope to embark on a second phase shortly. The demolition and remediation work is essential in order to prepare the site for any kind of development. The deputy First Minister and I are considering proposals for the development of the former prison based on the 2006 master plan, and we will report to the Executive when we reach a conclusion.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that the Long Kesh/Maze development should be under construction by now, does the First Minister agree that the delay has cost construction jobs, cost us the opportunity to stage major events in the 2012 Olympics, and endangered our involvement in the World Police and Fire Games?

The First Minister: That is all very well, but the accounting officers in OFMDFM and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) indicated that they could not sign the project off with a clean bill of health in terms of value for money. They agreed that the Executive would have to consider extraneous, non-financial issues in order to justify the project. Some blame should be placed on direct rule Ministers, who took the process out of sync and approached bidders before the completion of the business-case process.

However, OFMDFM is determined to resolve the Maze/Long Kesh site difficulties. I do not accept that jobs have been lost. Any building on the site must be constructed and developed in the interest of the surrounding area and Northern Ireland as a whole. First-class development of the site is important, and its various components are being considered. Moreover, construction jobs will be created in the building of a stadium or stadia, whether on that site or elsewhere. Furthermore, the operation of that stadium or stadia will create more jobs. Jobs are not lost, but a decision must be taken on the issue. Therefore, I hope that progress will be made.

Mr Ross: Does the First Minister agree that the best way for the Executive to take decisions on the development of the Maze site or other sites, or any loss

or creation of jobs, is for Ministers to meet around the Executive table?

The First Minister: That is by far the best way. Needless to say, there is a requirement on OFMDFM, because it has ministerial responsibility for the site. There is a ministerial responsibility on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to introduce proposals that meet the value-for-money and affordability requirements that the Department of Finance and Personnel set.

The process requires work to be done outside the Executive, but by far the best way in which to resolve any differences is to meet around the Executive table with ministerial colleagues.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister reveal what viable options are under consideration to build a stadium somewhere other than the former Maze Prison site, considering that jobs are needed for people in a construction industry that is at an all-time low?

The First Minister: I would be straying outside my ministerial responsibility were I to respond to the question. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has indicated that he wants to make a statement to the Assembly on those issues, but he first wants to take the views of Executive colleagues into consideration, and he wants them to be aware of the proposals. It would be wrong for me to usurp his position and pre-empt what he might say.

The options, however, are obvious: a stadium could be built at the Maze site; a stadium could be built elsewhere; several stadia could be built elsewhere; or nothing could happen at all. I hope that the final option is not one that is being seriously considered, given the state of our major sports stadia in Northern Ireland. I hope that options for a national stadium or numerous stadia are being considered, because those will provide jobs.

Strategic Investment Board

5. **Mr Newton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the role of the Strategic Investment Board in delivering major infrastructure projects. (AQO 568/09)

The First Minister: The Executive's investment strategy that the Assembly approved in January 2008 is the largest-ever commitment to infrastructure development in Northern Ireland. By 2018, we plan to invest almost £20 billion to tackle the legacy of decades of underinvestment that we inherited.

That determined action will put in place the assets that are required to support high-quality public services, to regenerate communities and to enhance the economic competitiveness that is essential to sustaining jobs and prosperity. Just over five years ago, infrastructure

investment was less than £1 billion per annum. Last year, it amounted to almost £1.4 billion, and it is planned to reach £2 billion by the end of this Budget period.

That is a measure of our recent success and of our ambition to go further, but delivering the investment strategy involves more than simply spending the money. Our key commitments must be delivered on time, to a high-quality standard and at value for money. It also means investing in projects that offer a good return. Expectations are high, but we must not underestimate the challenges. We now face global financial and economic difficulties. Our local construction industry, in particular, is looking to our investment programme to support local jobs through difficult times ahead, and to provide opportunities for more apprenticeships and training. We are determined to ensure that the investment strategy helps to meet those calls.

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) performs a vital role in the development, monitoring and communication of our investment strategy, and — in moving forward — our key infrastructure-investment programmes. It helps Departments to deliver major projects across the full spectrum of services, including healthcare, the environment, schools and colleges, roads, water, waste and public administration.

The SIB provides expert commercial, legal and project-delivery advice to Departments, drawing on its advisers' extensive experience of major infrastructure procurements. That advice helps us to ensure that the best deals are obtained for the public purse and that risks are identified and appropriately managed. We recently met the SIB chairman and its chief executive to discuss the progress that is being made in implementing the investment strategy and to consider what additional steps could be taken to introduce capital projects.

3.00 pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Street Lighting: Rural Areas

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will review the criteria for the provision of street lighting in rural areas.

(AQO 676/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When considering the provision of street lighting in rural areas, my Department's Roads Service applies two main criteria: the housing density in the community, including public buildings with significant night-time use, and road safety, in circumstances in

which street lighting might contribute to a reduction of night-time accidents.

Roads Service last reviewed the policy for the provision of road lighting in rural areas in 2002 in order to take account of public buildings with significant night-time use. The demand for more rural lighting must be balanced against environmental impacts, such as night-sky light pollution and increased carbon dioxide emissions; the financial cost of providing and maintaining additional public-lighting installations must also be considered.

Roads Service previously considered two scenarios for extending rural street-lighting criteria: first, to extend the eligible length of road from 200m to 300m, and, secondly, to reduce the number of dwellings — including public dwellings — that are counted as two houses from 10 to eight. Both measures would reduce the housing density required to qualify for lighting, and it was estimated that those measures could enable approximately 180 additional locations to be eligible for street lighting, broadly costing an additional £3 million. There are no plans for a further review of rural, public-lighting criteria.

Mrs D Kelly: Many rural dwellers will be disappointed that there will be no review, particularly in light of the impact of PPS 14 on rural areas and the loss of any opportunity for housing growth.

I am interested in what the Minister claims to be night-time light pollution. One can only assume that that comes from increased energy consumption, because I cannot conceive of how light could contribute to pollution in the night sky.

Are the set criteria not subjective, rather than objective? There appears to be a lack of clarity throughout various sectors about how the criteria should be implemented. Therefore, in light of PPS 14, will the Minister reconsider his decision to review street lighting?

The Minister for Regional Development: There is a measurement of night-time light pollution, and I shall leave it for, perhaps, the Minister of the Environment to explain to the Member in more detail. *[Laughter.]* Nevertheless, light pollution is a recognised factor in the countryside and it changes the character of many rural areas.

When PPS 14 is changed — as we hope that it will be — that may increase the number of qualifying public buildings in rural areas and allow more of them to meet the criteria. The Member knows that the amount that we can spend on such matters is limited. The range of requests is always greater than the measures for which we have adequate resources. Therefore, we must set criteria, against which we must prioritise our spending.

The Member wants more street lighting in rural areas; her colleague has submitted a question about footpaths, and I am sure that he wants more of them in rural areas. Last week, some of the Member's colleagues proposed a motion on traffic-calming measures, in which they wished every residential area to have 20 mph zones and traffic-calming measures. That is all wonderful, and if those Members had argued for my Department to receive several hundred million pounds more during the Budget debate, at least their approach would have been consistent. However, it is all very well to argue for such things, and for spending more money, after the Budget has been set. The Department spends as much as possible under the criteria, and it attempts to do as good a job as it can with its limited budget.

Mr Shannon: The Minister said that health and safety was a matter that had influenced his response. Will he tell Members about the street-lighting policy, particularly with regard to health and safety, for footpaths that lead to churches and, indeed, chapels in the countryside? Why is there sometimes a footpath with no street lighting and street lighting with no footpath? Perhaps, now is the time to co-ordinate the provision of both facilities.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am sure that Roads Service will seek to co-ordinate those matters when it can.

Roads Service may sometimes inherit developments where there is a footpath that has no lighting, or vice versa. As I said, public safety is a key criterion. When public safety is being examined, it is a sad but necessary fact that accident history has to play a part in deciding where limited resources are spent. Therefore, areas that have more of an accident history are prioritised.

Chapels, churches or other public buildings are treated as two dwellings when using the equation that is based on 10 houses. In 2002, a review was carried out to consider public buildings that have a specific night-time use. It may not be the case that churches or chapels have the same amount of night-time use as some community halls or sports facilities, but that is how they are included in the calculation. However, public safety is a key element; therefore, the accident history of an area is taken into account.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his robust first answer to the question — I am sure that it is not necessary for a Member from County Antrim to refer one of the Members from Armagh to the observatory and the effects that light pollution has on astronomy.

Has the Minister obtained an assessment from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency — or the Environment and Heritage Service, as it was in its previous life — of the effect of increasing amounts of street lighting in rural areas on nocturnal wildlife and

the potential threat that such lighting may be to our environment?

The Minister for Regional Development: When providing street lighting in rural areas, the effect of night-time light pollution is one issue that is taken into consideration. I am sure that Roads Service will take advice from environmental agencies when determining the effect that such pollution will have. I am not sure whether Roads Service takes advice on the impact that it could have on wildlife, but I will try to ascertain that and will correspond with the Member on the matter.

Roads Resurfacing

2. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development if there has been a reduction in the Roads Service Southern Division's budget for roads resurfacing. (AQO 658/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Since the start of the financial year, there has not been a reduction in my Department's Roads Service 2008-09 budget of £4.3 million for Roads Service resurfacing activities in the southern division.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the criteria for the allocation of the roads budget for each region?

The Minister for Regional Development: In distributing the resources that are available for road maintenance, allocations are made to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators that are tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions use those indicators when apportioning costs across council areas to ensure that there is, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds.

Mr Cobain: I am glad that Mr Clarke raised the issue. Will the Minister state how often he intends to have trunk roads in Northern Ireland resurfaced?

The Minister for Regional Development: There is a policy schedule for the resurfacing of trunk roads. Obviously, if there are particular problems on trunk roads that are creating a danger, those roads would move up the priority list. If the Member, who is the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, so wishes, I will ask the Department to furnish him with the policy schedule for the resurfacing of trunk roads.

Mr P J Bradley: Coming as I do from the southern division, I understand why Mr Clarke asked that question. People were hopeful that direct rule Ministers' neglect of rural roads would be dealt with by the Assembly, but that has not been the case. Roads in South Down are in the worst condition that they have ever been in. Does the Minister agree with my

assessment of the condition of the roads, and will he state how he proposes to deal with that?

The Minister for Regional Development: That depends on how far back in history the Member wants to go; I am not sure whether he is comparing the condition of the roads in South Down with their condition 10 years ago or 100 years ago. I would hazard a guess that they are in better condition now than they were 100 years ago.

My response to the Member is the same as that which I gave to his party colleague a few minutes ago — DRD's budget was allocated after a Budget debate in which the Member and all other Members had an opportunity to speak. Since the Budget was allocated, I have received requests — particularly from Mr Bradley's party — for more street lighting and footpaths, 20 mph zones to be created in every residential area, and, now, for a substantial uplift in the money that is spent on rural roads. Perhaps I would be in a better position to deal with some of those issues had I heard those arguments during the Budget debate.

Derry/Londonderry to Belfast Rail Service

3. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in acquiring land from the Ministry of Defence for a passing loop for the Derry/Londonderry to Belfast rail service. (AQO 644/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The location of a passing loop is yet to be decided. Options are being considered, and Ballykelly is one such option.

It is hoped that sufficient information will be available by November 2008 to allow a preferred option to be selected. It is intended that the passing loop will be constructed during the Derry/Coleraine track relay.

The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company has registered an interest with the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Land and Property Services to purchase land on behalf of Translink. Based on discussions with the relevant parties, it is my understanding that it will be the new year before any firm decisions are made on possible disposal.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. When examining location options, will the determination be made on the availability of land or on engineering logistics? When does the Minister expect to know the preferred location for the passing loop?

The Minister for Regional Development: OFMDFM is progressing the issue of how the land at Ballykelly may be transferred or sold. It is not part of Translink's consideration, as it is examining the project solely on engineering grounds. That issue could have an impact

when it comes to acquisitions, but at present Translink is considering only engineering solutions.

We want to ensure that the MOD is aware of the interest, as the site may be chosen for the passing loop. We should know by next month when the preferred option is selected. Should Ballykelly be selected, discussions should be entered into in early 2009. We have registered an interest with the MOD to ensure that nothing happens to the land that would make a solution more difficult.

Mr G Robinson: Is the Minister actively considering the provision of a rail halt at the airport serving the city of Londonderry and further afield?

The Minister for Regional Development: That issue has been raised several times, as have rail halts at both Belfast airports. There are criteria for the number of passengers who might use such a service; Aldergrove may be moving towards that target, but the City of Derry Airport is a long way from it.

We want to ensure that we improve and upgrade the line between Derry and Coleraine after the upgrade from Ballymena to Coleraine to ensure that a decent rail service is provided between Belfast and Derry. A rail halt at the City of Derry Airport will not be considered as part of that project. I am happy to keep the matter under review; however, given the criteria used to consider the International Airport, the City of Derry Airport is a long way from meeting those criteria.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Minister committed to the use of railways as a transportation method for the future? Are there any other —perhaps more imaginative— proposals for the Belfast to Londonderry route? Will those proposals include linking Antrim, Lisburn and Belfast?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member will have heard other questions and debates about the Belfast to Derry line. An example of my commitment to that line is the fact that I lifted the investment ban between Coleraine and Derry when I came into office. That allowed the investment for the passing loop at Ballykelly and the improvement in the track relay between Derry and Coleraine. Furthermore, it has allowed commuter traffic into Derry before 9 am for the first time. It has allowed for additional trains on the Belfast to Derry line and has improved the service between Belfast and Derry. Those are examples of my commitment to rail travel.

Rail travel is a very expensive option in relation to infrastructure, but I am committed to it. If that leads us to examine the Knockmore line and the connections between Antrim, Lisburn and Belfast, so be it. We have secured investment for the Belfast to Derry line. There are ongoing improvement works between Belfast and Ballymena and Ballymena and Coleraine. We want to secure and continue the work from Coleraine to Derry until 2011, thus improving the service on the Belfast to Derry line.

Belfast International Airport: Signage

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider the erection of signage for Belfast International Airport at the A1 at Sprucefield, directing drivers along the M1 and A26 Moira to Nutts Corner road. (AQO 536/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service carried out a preliminary assessment of the existing directional signage from the A1 at Sprucefield to Belfast International Airport in December 2007. That assessment concluded that new signage via the M1 motorway and the A26 would be appropriate. Roads Service has identified the signs along the A1 and A101 routes that need to be replaced. It is expected that the design, procurement and erection of those replacement signs will be completed by the end of March 2009.

3.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Minister's response. Does he agree that it is important that those gaps are filled as quickly as possible if Belfast International Airport, and our other airports, are to achieve their obvious objective of being regional airports for Northern Ireland as well as serving the border counties of the Republic?

The Minister for Regional Development: I agree with the Member. The potential for opening up new markets for Belfast International Airport was recognised particularly in relation to the work that was done along the new stretch of the A1 between Belfast and Dublin. That is when the impetus and argument around the need for directional signs at Sprucefield, to the airport, became evident.

As I said in my initial answer, Roads Service has responded. We are considering ways of amending and improving the signage. I have had discussions with the management of Belfast International Airport, and since the commencement of Aer Lingus flights there, passenger numbers have increased and business is continuing to grow. That is good news for the area.

Mr McNarry: In light of the aforementioned tourism and commercial significance of our airports and harbours — particularly those at Ballywalter, Portavogie and Portaferry, to name but a few, in one beautiful constituency — does the Minister take a uniform approach to the provision of signage in those locations?

The Minister for Regional Development: The need for signage at Sprucefield was raised because people thought that, given the road improvements and the increase in traffic coming from the southern side towards Belfast International Airport — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Please allow the Minister to answer.

The Minister for Regional Development: Given the increase in traffic coming from the southern side towards Belfast International Airport, some people thought that additional signage was needed. If the Member has a request for signage at any of the places that he mentioned, he can contact me and I will be happy to do what I can.

Mr Lunn: In his answer to Mr Hamilton's initial question, the Minister referred to the A26. Does he agree that if that important road, which is the main route from the south to the north coast and the airport, gains extra traffic, the A26 dual carriageway between Moira and Nutts Corner should be upgraded as soon as possible.

The Minister for Regional Development: It would be nice to have the money to do all those things. The recognition of the need for improved signage at Sprucefield arose because of the significant increase in traffic and the potential for more business for Belfast International Airport. The need for directions to Belfast International Airport was an issue, particularly for people coming from the southern side. That is why the signage was improved.

If the traffic increases to such an extent that it merits another look at the road and its upgrading, the Department will look at that in due course.

A5 Derry/Londonderry to Aughnacloy

5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A5 Derry/Londonderry to Aughnacloy road scheme.

(AQO 654/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Since the Member's previous question for oral answer in February 2008 in relation to the A5, Roads Service has carried out a series of public information events and has progressed work to identify a preferred corridor. I am pleased to advise the House that that work is nearing completion, and an announcement on the preferred corridor is expected later this year.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware that a major road scheme between Derry and Dungiven is under way, as well as the bypass. Both road schemes will have an impact on traffic in Derry. What plans does the Minister have to ease that impact?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member is correct: there will be two major road improvement schemes on the A5 and the A6 in the vicinity of Derry in the coming years, and they will have an impact on traffic in the city. There have been a significant number of developments in and around the city already: the Skeoge Link, the opening of which I

attended; the Crescent Link; the Broadbridge scheme to provide dual carriageway at Clooney Road from Maydown to the City of Derry Airport; and the two main roads that the Member mentioned. We are also beginning a project to widen the Buncrana Road from Pennyburn roundabout to the border, and that will assist in relieving traffic congestion.

Due to the impact of the two major routes coming in from Belfast and the Aughnacloy side of the border, Roads Service has commissioned consultants to consider linkages around the city and the impact that those two projects will have. Reports on the preliminary work on that consultation should be available before the end of the year.

Mr Bresland: Many of my constituents have concerns about the possible route for the A5 dual carriageway scheme. Will the Minister give an assurance that the landowners and the wider community will be kept informed of the proposals for the A5 programme?

The Minister for Regional Development: I assure the Member that that will be the case. He knows that there have been several public information events on the routes that may be considered. Within the next couple of months — before the year is out — I hope to announce the preferred corridor, which will contain several route options. Again, that will go out to public consultation, and people who live along that corridor will be given an opportunity to comment on it. It is a substantial piece of road building, and the biggest that has ever been undertaken on this island. It is going through mainly rural areas and will affect a substantial number of landowners.

A tried and tested procedure has been gone through for many road schemes, including the A4 extension from Dungannon to Ballygawley, where a substantial number of landowners had to be dealt with. I assure the Member that there will be ongoing public consultation. Landowners affected directly will have the opportunity to have their say and to ensure that their voices are heard.

Mrs M Bradley: When can people in Derry expect to see plans to upgrade the Waterside railway station?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member has managed to jump to question 19. As I would have said had I got that far, there have been several upgrading works on the station. Any further work will be considered in conjunction with the track relay scheme between Coleraine and Derry due to happen in 2011.

Blasting Operations: A1

6. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development what compensation is available to (i)

residents; and (ii) businesses, whose properties are damaged as a result of blasting operations connected with the construction of the new A1. (AQO 646/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The removal of rock by blasting is an integral aspect of the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme. Although I regret the disruption that construction activity is causing to adjacent properties, blasting remains the only practical process, given the quantity and characteristics of the rock involved. The contractor on site is required to employ current good practice in relation to the construction process to ensure that all necessary and appropriate measures are implemented to protect properties in the vicinity of the work from damage.

Under the terms of the contract, the contractor will deal with any claims that may arise in the event of damage caused to residential or business properties by rock blasting.

Mr D Bradley: An dtig liom a fhiafraí den Aire cá mhéad teach agus gnólacht a ndearnadh dochar dóibh agus ar thug an tAire cuairt orthu? Caidé an measúnú a rinne sé orthu?

How many homes and businesses damaged by the blasting has the Minister visited? Will he give Members an assessment of what he has observed? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Regional Development: I have not visited any properties. As far as I am aware — and I have kept an eye on the situation — only one property has reported any damage. The owners have been in touch with Roads Service and have been informed of the procedure for pursuing compensation.

The Member is shaking his head. Perhaps he will correspond with me and tell me about the other properties; however, I am aware of only one. The owners have contacted Roads Service, and they have been advised who is responsible for the site. The contractor is responsible, and he has informed his insurance agents that there may be the possibility of a claim. That is the process.

The Member is keen to try to put Roads Service or me in the middle as having some responsibility. However, as the Member has been told on several occasions, a contractor employed to carry out work is responsible for what happens. Contractors are responsible for dealing with any damage or inconvenience caused as a result of their actions. That is the way the contract was designed, that is how it is being operated, and that is why the Department has given the Member the same advice repeatedly.

Mr Irwin: Is the Minister aware of any precautions that had been adopted prior to blasting operations to ensure the safety of livestock on neighbouring lands?

The Minister for Regional Development: I am not aware that any livestock have been endangered. I am aware that the owners of one business property have claimed that there was damage, and they have been instructed how to process any claim that may arise. I know quite a number of people who live in that area, and I talk to them regularly. I have not heard of any further claims of damage, either to property or to livestock. However, if there are others, I am sure that they will be able to pursue their claim in the same way.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister undertake to investigate and resolve the access issue at Newry's Altnaveigh Road, which is just off the A1? That is causing serious concern among some of my constituents, including Mr Nummy.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member was involved in discussions on the matter during the summer, so he will know that a liaison group that comprises local residents has been set up. The group covers Corrinshogo and Altnaveigh, as well as several other areas along the existing bypass and where the construction of the new road is ongoing. That group has regular contact with Roads Service and, more importantly, the contractors — they are the people who are closing roads in order to carry out construction work. I am led to believe that a further meeting about the Cloghogue area is to be held this week.

The liaison group, which also has local council involvement, appears to be functioning quite well. Therefore, if the Member's constituents are keen to pursue the issue, they can do so through that group, which has acted on behalf of a number of residents and groups along the length of the bypass. However, if they wish to pursue the matter in a different way, I am happy to deal with any request that the Member brings to me.

Portadown Railway Station

7. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress made in relation to the renovations at Portadown Railway Station. (AQO 666/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink is currently involved in the preliminary stages of a project to refurbish Portadown station, and it expects the feasibility study to be completed by the end of 2008. After that, several further stages must be completed, including the production of an economic appraisal to establish value for money and the obtaining of planning permission. My Department will consider granting approval for that project when all those procedures have been successfully completed, and if the necessary funding can be secured.

Mr Simpson: The Minister will be aware that the people of Portadown have long awaited that project. Craigavon Borough Council was given assurances that it would start in 2009. Will the Minister use his influence to ensure that Translink meets that deadline?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said, a number of processes must be completed before the project can start. What I am about to say relates to the question that Basil McCrea asked: the Department's intention is to give a commitment to try to improve trains, journey times and facilities at various railway stations, because it has been shown that, where facilities and public transport improve, the number of passengers increases. The Department's intention is to increase the numbers of people using public transport. I will undertake to speak to Translink to ensure that no unnecessary delay takes place in pursuing the scheme. I am not au fait with the discussions between Translink and Craigavon Borough Council, so I do not know what assurances were sought or given. However, I will certainly make it my business to ensure that there are no unnecessary delays in delivering the project.

Mr Brady: What plans are under way to construct other new railway stations?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member will be aware that Translink has been given approval to proceed with a new £14·6 million railway station at Newry. It is expected that that work will be completed in 2009. A scheme for a bus/rail station in Antrim is also to be developed over the next few years.

Rapid-Transit Proposals

9. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the rapid-transit proposals. (AQO 652/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Good progress has been made since the take-note debate in the House on the strategic outline case for rapid transit on Tuesday 3 June 2008. We have concluded the engagement with key stakeholders. As a result of some concerns that were expressed, we further explored an alternative route for rapid transit in east Belfast. The results of that work have shown that it is not viable to use the Upper Newtownards Road as part of the scheme. We are also establishing a dedicated delivery team for rapid transit and are purchasing land for the scheme. In recognition of the wider benefits of rapid transit, I have also written to my ministerial colleagues, inviting their comments on my proposals.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Member to ask a quick supplementary question.

Mr O'Dowd: Has the Minister carried out any assessment of the positive environmental impact that a

rapid-transit scheme would have in taking traffic off the roads of Belfast?

The Minister for Regional Development: The purpose of rapid-transit schemes — indeed, of investment in all public transport — is to reduce the number of cars on the roads, thereby reducing the congestion and pollution that traffic causes. Of course, investment in a rapid-transit system is expected to have a positive impact on the environment, and it will certainly have a positive impact on the development of the city of Belfast itself.

Mr Speaker: That ends questions to the Minister for Regional Development.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Library Services: Rural Areas

1. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to engage with local communities in relation to priorities for library services to rural areas. (AQO 552/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): In November 2005, my Department undertook an extensive consultation exercise that included the views of the rural community. Those views were recognised and incorporated into the resulting policy framework. The boards are responsible for delivering public library services in line with public libraries policy, which includes engaging with rural communities on local service priorities. Local engagement is ongoing within the boards and will continue when the Northern Ireland library authority is created.

The Carnegie Library redevelopment in Bangor is almost complete, and the building should open to the public next month. The £2·7 million investment in the Ward Park facility is one of a number of projects that will modernise and improve the public library estate.

Mr Weir: Next month's opening of the new Carnegie Library in Bangor will be a welcome development that everyone will embrace. How will communities be consulted after the creation of the Northern Ireland library authority?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: An appearance at Carnegie Hall will take on another connotation in Bangor.

The Northern Ireland library authority will become operational in 2009 and will have local consultative groups. A pilot group will be established in each of the four geographic business areas within the first three months of the library authority's establishment.

Library services must continue to be relevant to local needs. Therefore, although the service will be planned and led regionally, it will be delivered locally.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail the extent of co-operation between Donegal County Council and the Western Education and Library Board regarding mobile library services in that border area?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I have outlined on previous occasions, the provision of library services is a matter for the board. However, I appreciate that mobile library services — particularly in the western area — have a cross-border context, and there is a mobile library facility for that specific purpose. Given the terrain and the rural nature of the land along the part of the border to which the Member refers, it is sensible and productive for such liaison to take place. The facility is, apparently, well used. I encourage people — particularly those in Northern Ireland but also those in the Irish Republic — to make use of that facility, and I hope that everyone will.

Mr Gardiner: Since 34% of the population live in rural areas, does the Minister agree that his Department's raw expenditure on library provision needs to be rural proofed? The rural population of 565,000 is served by only 30 mobile libraries — that is approximately one library for every 20,000 people. Does the Minister have any plans to increase that provision?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: That issue was raised during my last appearance at Question Time; indeed, I think that that was as a result of a question from the honourable Member. The provision of library services in rural areas is primarily a matter for the education and library boards. My information is that provision in rural areas is satisfactory and has been satisfactory over recent years because no new demands for additional services — either from members of the public or public representatives — have been made to the education and library boards.

If Members feel that there are areas that could be adequately covered by existing services, or in which additional resources might be deployed in order to provide that service, that information must be made known — in the first instance, to the relevant education and library board. The board and I will then consider that information.

Inland Fish Stocks: Pollution

2. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the impact of pollution incidences on inland fish stocks in the last year.
(AQO 622/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that several pollution incidents in the past year have resulted in significant fish kills. Fisheries Conservancy Board staff have investigated the incidents and estimated the numbers and types of fish killed. DCAL will work closely with the Environment Agency and angling clubs in order to provide advice and assistance about how to reinstate the affected waters.

Pollution incidents have a broader impact on fisheries. Pollution results in a loss of revenue from fishing and, sometimes, a reduction in the population of species that are already under threat. A pollution incident normally kills fish of varying ages. There is, therefore, a knock-on affect for at least three to four years before fish populations recover to sustainable levels.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that there is a wider impact on recreational tourism and its associated business areas? Will the Minister instigate a review that will put a figure on the financial loss to the local economy, and ensure that that loss is taken into account in a system of fines that is based on the polluter pays principle?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member raises a valid and interesting point. I repeat what has been previously stated: the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is responsible for restocking rivers. The polluter pays principle is an admirable one that most people believe in and advocate, but it is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment (DOE). In the first instance, my Department and the Environment Agency want to ensure that pollution of rivers is prevented — an issue that is primarily dealt with by the Department of the Environment.

However, there is close liaison between my Department and the DOE in order to ensure that pollution is prevented; that where pollution occurs, those responsible pay for their actions; and, importantly, as I have stated, that rivers are restocked. I subscribe to the principle of the polluter paying that is contained in the Member's question.

Mr McKay: In the wake of the Minister of the Environment's decision to extend the slurry-spreading period until the end of the year, has the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure been advised by his officials, or received correspondence from the Environment Minister, about the possible pollution threat posed by that extension?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have not received any communication from any individuals or groups — including the Minister of the Environment — about the potential pollution danger raised by the Member. I will draw his comments to the attention of my Department and the Department of the Environment.

However, if there were any serious potential for pollution, Departments would have been alerted and the Minister of the Environment would not have made that decision in the first instance.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell Members what discussions he has had with the Minister of the Environment about the cleaning up and restocking of the Six Mile Water River in Antrim after it suffered a recent, disastrous fish kill?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member has drawn attention to what was a very serious incident. My officials are liaising with the Department of the Environment in order to establish the full extent of the fish kill and to prevent any repetition of such an event.

The situation is difficult and must be monitored closely. I intend to continue liaising with the Department of the Environment, concentrating on those two strategies: preventing a repeat incident and ensuring that the river is adequately restocked with fish.

Safety at Sports Grounds

3. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given the public concern that safety at sports grounds is being compromised, what long-term plans he has to ensure public safety at these venues.
(AQO 675/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for developing long-term plans to ensure public safety at sports venues in Northern Ireland rests with the owners and operators of those venues. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is taking forward a safety at sports grounds initiative, which aims to assist owners and operators of major sports facilities to improve public safety at their grounds in the longer term. As part of that process, the Department is implementing new legislation on safety at sports grounds — the Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. In addition, Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, has been running funding programmes designed to assist owners and operators to improve public safety at their venues. The programmes include a stadia safety programme and a previous interim safe sports grounds scheme.

Mrs Hanna: Will that include an audit of safety and resource requirements, and will it involve the closure of any grounds?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer the last part of the Member's question first. I do not envisage any venue closing as the result of an audit. Funding is being considered for some grounds

through the programmes that I have outlined. The names of those grounds can be supplied to the Member, but I am reluctant to mention them, as that would open Pandora's box. However, operators of all sporting grounds should be aware of the grant-aided schemes that are available. If they are not aware of them, they should become aware of them and make applications, because it is essential that everyone using a sports ground in Northern Ireland, for whatever legitimate purpose, should be able to do so in the knowledge that they will be safe as they go there and safe as they return from it. That is the aim of the scheme, and, hopefully, it will be fully operational shortly.

Mr McNarry: I am taken by the emphatic nature of the Minister's answers. Will he comment on a 'BBC Newsline' report on 20 August 2008, which referred to a letter written by the chief executive of Sport Northern Ireland to the Department in September 2007, in which he wrote about the many unsafe sports venues and about the safety of spectators being compromised?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of the report to which the honourable Member refers. There were some inaccuracies in it. For example, there was reference to Great Britain's Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975 being rushed through — but the legislation was actually enacted four years after the disaster that pre-empted it. Therefore, it was not rushed through.

The Department was already aware of a number of matters contained in the report. Northern Ireland, through Sport Northern Ireland, will have an overseeing body that will be very similar to the Football Licensing Authority in GB. The Department is in the process of ensuring that it will be in a position to guarantee that — even though some concerns in the programme were inaccurate — the underlying concern is for the safety of the public using stadia in Northern Ireland. That is a very real and present concern.

However, it is a concern that Sport NI and all of us should be acutely aware of. We must take steps to address those problems.

3.45 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Aire as a fhreagra.

I asked the previous Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure about the legislation in March 2008. He said that Sport NI wished to delay the legislation because it wanted the inclusion of an independent oversight function that it would carry out. Will the Minister explain why, now that we are in October, that still has not been established? Is the delay related to the crowd capacity problems that would ensue at Windsor Park if the legislation were to be enacted?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Whatever about issues of delay in the past, I know that agreement has already been reached with Sport NI on the issue of the oversight body. That body will provide advice and guidance to all interested parties on safety matters, and will monitor the implementation of a planned new sports grounds safety-certification scheme. Sport NI recently completed the recruitment exercise for the oversight body. I cannot comment on what may have happened in the past, but the facts are that the body is now in place, recruitment has been completed, and the body will be up and running shortly.

Multi-Sports Stadium: Maze Site

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with Executive colleagues in relation to the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQO 613/09)

Multi-Sports Stadium: Business Plan

9. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the business plan for the proposed multi-sports stadium. (AQO 615/09)

Multi-Sports Stadium: Time Frame

14. **Mrs D Kelly:** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the normal time frame for building major sports stadia; and if he is satisfied that the proposed multi-sports stadium will be built in time for the London Olympics. (AQO 677/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 9 and 14 together.

The outline business case for the proposed multi-sports stadium, together with a corresponding business case for the Maze project, for which OFMDFM is responsible, have been closely examined by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The current First Minister, in his former role as Minister of Finance and Personnel, provided advice to ministerial colleagues on his assessment of the stadium and the overall Maze project.

The issue of the multi-sports stadium, together with the overall regeneration of the Maze site, has still to be considered by the Executive. That is a further reason why it is important for the Executive to meet as soon as possible. The opportunity for Northern Ireland to host soccer matches as part of the 2012 Olympics is clearly contingent on the availability of a fit-for-

purpose stadium, although that would not necessarily require the building of a multi-sports stadium.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his response. He may not have heard the First Minister earlier when he set out the options for the future, which were: a single stadium at the Maze, a single stadium elsewhere, or upgrades to existing stadiums. The First Minister ruled out the do-nothing option. Will the Minister now rule out the idea of upgrading three elderly stadiums in order to provide three expensive elderly stadiums, and give a firm commitment to a single stadium for all sports, as a sign of a shared future?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I was not present when the First Minister spoke earlier, but it is self-evident that those are the options. As we stand, in October 2008, I am in a position to go to the Executive with a paper in order to clear up the uncertainty that has surrounded the issue. For that reason, I want an Executive meeting to take place as early as this Thursday. None of that takes me beyond where I want to go for the moment. The honourable Member invites me to declare what the new and ongoing position would be, but he would be the first to concede that I should do it according to the established protocols of the Assembly.

I am doing what I should be doing: consulting my Executive colleagues, then consulting the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and then come before the House — in that order. When I entered office in June, I said that I wanted to reveal when the uncertainty would end and to make progress in the autumn. We are well into autumn. If the Executive does not meet, I will have to examine other ways of taking the situation forward, but we have clear protocols by which I want to abide.

Mr Lunn: I am one of those who still hope to see a national stadium at the Maze. Does the Minister agree that the problems in agreeing a way forward on the Maze project are not entirely financial; nor are they solely related to the business plan or even to the recent impasse over Executive meetings? The problems stem from the original disagreement concerning the inability of the Minister's party, and presumably the Minister himself, to accept the concept of a conflict-transformation centre on the Maze site.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I hope that the Member heard my initial response about the business case for the Maze project, which was closely examined by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by the former First Minister. The Member mentioned the conflict-transformation initiative, but the issue remains — whether there was to be a conflict-transformation initiative or not — that there are serious questions about the funding of the Maze project. That does not mean that it is inconceivable that

the Maze project will proceed; however, three Departments expressed concerns about the business case. There is no disagreement in my party about the way forward, because I have yet to bring the proposal through the Executive, to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and to the Assembly. When that happens, the honourable Member and others will see the unity on the outcome of those discussions.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer, but the OFMDFM Committee — which I understand has overall responsibility for the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site — was told some months ago that in order for any development to be on-site in time for the London Olympics the application should have been lodged by November of last year. We heard the First Minister sharing his concerns about construction jobs, and we have also been told that 10,000 jobs are at stake. Is it the case that whenever a decision is made on the Maze/Long Kesh project, the DUP will change the Minister or will this Minister actually make a decision?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member issues a challenge on taking a decision. I said, within weeks of taking office, that the decision had to be taken in the autumn. It is now autumn and I am ready to take the decision, but I need an Executive meeting. I hope that the honourable Member follows the logic of the argument. If an Executive meeting is held on Thursday, I am ready to put a paper to the Executive this Thursday to proceed. The Member referred to the challenge of the 2012 Olympic Games. That will be a challenge, but it is not at all beyond the bounds of possibility that if we take a decision now — which I am ready to do — we will have a stadium for 2012. We will have a stadium if we take that decision now — which, as I say, I am ready, prepared, and able to do — but I need an Executive meeting to process the issue and to set in motion the choreography that I have outlined. We need the meeting, and, I hope, we will have it.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. It seems that those asking questions have failed to understand the importance of the views of sports' governing bodies. Have those bodies been made aware of the alternatives to a multi-sports stadium at the Maze? If so, what was their response?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My discussions with the three sporting bodies involved in the Maze project were straightforward. I told each body that I knew its previous position and asked whether that position remained the same. I then asked the three bodies what their preferred second option would be. As a result of those discussions, and others that I have had, I am in a position to furnish my Executive colleagues with a paper that should end the uncertainty. I can then begin significant and substantial

progress towards ensuring that the requirements of all three sports are met. That is my aim and objective, which will — hopefully — be achieved sooner rather than later.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Minister has partly answered my question and answered the critics, but I will read my question anyway. Is the Minister's prevarication and failure to make an announcement on the Maze project directly due to political pressure from Sinn Féin as part of ongoing negotiations between that party and his? Does he agree that part of the finance allocation for the Maze project should immediately be redirected to upgrade existing sports facilities and events, such as the North West 200 and the Ulster Grand Prix?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I understand the honourable Member's frustration, which is shared by many people. However, I reiterate that I took office in June and, within three weeks, said that I wanted to meet all the governing bodies of the sports involved in the Maze project, which I did before the summer. I then said that I wanted to make a decision in the autumn; it is now the autumn, and I am ready to make that decision. As per the rules that we operate under, I must bring a paper on the issue to an Executive meeting before I make a decision, which I am ready to do on Thursday. If that happens, we are immediately in business. I hope that the Executive meeting is held on Thursday, and we will be in business immediately thereafter.

Language Strategy

5. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to report on his plans for a language strategy. (AQO 618/09)

11. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the development of the indigenous languages strategy. (AQO 671/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 11 together. The interdepartmental charter implementation group has begun consideration of a strategy for indigenous minority languages. That strategy aims to protect, enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and the Irish language. I will present an initial paper to the Executive Committee on that later this year.

Dr Farry: Does the Minister see a role for himself in depoliticising the controversy that surrounds the Irish language? Also, does he see any merit in a potential compromise based on the language-scheme approach that his Department consulted on prior to the restoration of devolution, which reflects the reality on

the ground from the bottom up, rather than imposing something from the top down?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I do not disagree with the general thrust of the Member's comments. Depoliticising the Irish language is an excellent idea, which should have been thought of many years ago. There are many Irish-language enthusiasts who do not politicise the language, but those who do should cease forthwith. Hopefully, we can advance a proposal for languages per se within a non-political framework and in a non-contentious manner.

4.00 pm

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Neighbourhood Renewal Projects in Belfast

Mr Speaker: I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, for the Minister for Social Development.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development (i) whether the recent review that she instructed departmental officials to conduct into neighbourhood renewal projects in the Belfast area will result in services and jobs being lost in this geographical area and (ii) whether those projects that are waiting on overdue payments from Belfast regeneration offices will be paid immediately.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): First, let me be clear that I have not ordered any review. Those who suggest that I have ordered a review are only creating unnecessary anxieties.

I will, however, answer the questions raised. I asked for some financial information about the current neighbourhood renewal process in Belfast. I want to satisfy myself that best use is being made of available resources, and, given the pressure on funds across my Department, to make sure that sufficient funds are in place in order to complete the programme.

I will be spending some £30 million on neighbourhood renewal in Belfast over the next three years. It is only right that before the first major tranche of contracts are issued, I satisfy myself that the resources are in place in order to complete the process, and that resources are sufficient for purpose and properly targeted in line with the appraisal processes that officials are required to follow.

Neighbourhood renewal is about closing the gap between the most disadvantaged in Northern Ireland and the rest of our society. I want to see important services delivered to people on the ground, whether by statutory agencies or by voluntary and community organisations. The role of my Department's neighbourhood renewal investment fund is to ensure that such services are delivered, not to sustain jobs in voluntary and community-sector organisations.

I hope that when the process is completed, we will have a stronger focus on services. I have said on the record that individual appraisals and approvals of local neighbourhood renewal projects will be conducted by officials. I will not get involved in those decisions, and I expect that the majority of existing posts will continue to be funded. However, I can give no guarantees.

Payments under contracts for funding will not fall due until those contracts have been approved, issued and signed. I am bound by Government accounting rules, commonly known as managing public money, which prohibit advance payments. I can assure the Member that, when contracts for funding are in force, payments will be made in a timely manner.

I expect to be able to make an announcement in the next few days about the clearance of contracts. I wish to remind Members that neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's main programme for tackling disadvantage. There is an onus on other Departments to match the commitment and, perhaps more importantly, the resources of the Department for Social Development with regard to projects.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If it walks like a review and looks like a review, it is a review. Forbye all that, the Minister did not answer the question about jobs and services being lost with regard to the outcome of this review. For example, in the Crumlin and Ardoyne wards in north Belfast, the neighbourhood renewal partnership has been suspended and workers are in receipt of redundancy and protective notices. As a result of the Minister's political interference and, indeed, political vetting of that project — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: All the economic appraisals for each of the partnerships have been conducted, and the panels recommended that most of those projects be funded. What, therefore, is the reason for the delay? These services, which are for the most deprived areas in the North of Ireland, are now at risk.

The Minister for Social Development: I am deeply disappointed at the comments made by the Member. I emphasise, yet again, that I have not ordered any review, and those who have suggested that I have ordered a review are the ones who are creating anxieties and uncertainty on the ground.

I again emphasise that I have asked for financial information about the current neighbourhood renewal process in Belfast.

I want to be satisfied that the best use is being made of available resources and also, given the pressure on departmental funds, to ensure that they are sufficient to complete the programme. Furthermore, I understand the difficulties of groups whose money has run out. I hope to have some good news for them in the future.

Mr Attwood: I urge you, Mr Speaker, to reflect upon the comments of the Member for North Belfast, who said that there has been political interference and vetting. I ask you to rule on those comments at another time. If true, they would be a breach of the Minister's

Pledge of Office, her commitment to political impartiality and, even more fundamentally, of her proven input —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to put his question.

Mr Attwood: I have raised a matter about the comments of the Member for North Belfast, who has strayed beyond political convention in the Chamber and has made serious allegations of political interference and vetting.

Mr Speaker: Order. I insist that the Member put his supplementary question to the Minister.

Mr Attwood: I look forward to your ruling on that matter, Mr Speaker.

I ask the Minister whether she agrees that, given that she has demonstrated an unambiguous commitment to people who are in social and housing need, it is a bit rich for certain people to come to the Chamber and make ridiculous allegations that she has created undue anxiety in the community. *[Interruption.]*

Will you call to order those who interrupt me, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that I have given him considerable latitude on the issue. He must ask the Minister a supplementary question. I have already prompted him twice. Let us try to get to the supplementary question.

Mr Attwood: I am mindful of what you said, Mr Speaker.

Given that the Minister has stated in the Chamber today that the responsibility for neighbourhood renewal does not fall exclusively to her Department and that it is a shared responsibility across Government and the Departments of other Ministers, I ask her simply to tell Members what commitments have come from her ministerial colleagues, including those from the party from which the question emanates.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. Members may find some background information helpful.

As one who is deeply interested in social disadvantage — who puts need and the delivery of services to meet that need at the centre of everything that I do — I want to emphasise the point that there is a budget for neighbourhood renewal that will be spent in neighbourhood-renewal areas. The £30 million that has been allocated for Belfast's neighbourhood-renewal areas during the next three years will be spent in those areas. Therefore, people who live in disadvantaged, neighbourhood-renewal areas need not worry on that score.

As regards my colleague's question about the Executive's and ministerial colleagues' commitment, I remind Members that neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's main programme for tackling disadvantage. There is an onus on other Departments to match the

commitment and, perhaps, more important, the resources of the Department for Social Development (DSD) towards projects.

I understand that the Member for North Belfast Ms Ní Chuilín has asked various Ministers about their commitment to neighbourhood renewal. I will provide the House with some detail. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development said that her Department:

“has no direct involvement in the Programme, and would have no remit to fund posts and services in connection with it”,

even though her Department has a representative on the partnership body. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister said:

“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.”

OFMDFM is also represented on the Minister-led partnership body. Therefore, Mr Speaker, I must ask what other Departments’ commitment and buy-in are when neighbourhood renewal is an Executive-led initiative.

All Members of the Assembly — and of the Executive, were it allowed to meet — should ask those questions, try to tackle that issue and demonstrate real care and commitment on the ground, particularly in disadvantaged areas, instead of engaging in petty political point-scoring and trying to undermine certain individuals.

Mrs Long: I recognise the Minister’s point that this is a significant amount of funding and that processes have to be followed.

I have corresponded with the Minister concerning an issue that arose in my constituency. I understand her point that the funding is not intended to provide jobs for people. However, last week, half the staff engaged on that project went without salaries; this week, all the staff will do so. If interim arrangements are not put in place, is there not a risk that, by the time final decisions are taken, delivery of service will have been negatively impacted upon by the loss of qualified and experienced staff?

Minister for Social Development: I thank Mrs Long for her question. Unlike others, she has written to me directly about this matter. I understand the difficulties faced by the group whose money has run out, and I hope to have some good news for it later in the week. However, I am bound by Government accounting rules in relation to gap funding and — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister for Social Development: Therefore, I want to pursue all the issues relating to that matter.

I emphasise to the House that for me, need takes priority. That is the most important thing. I want services delivered where there is need.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

The Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (POCVA)

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the waiting time for POCVA checks to be processed; further notes that this is adversely affecting child care centres, amongst other employers; and asks the Secretary of State to investigate the situation and ensure that applications are processed as a matter of urgency.

[Mr J Shannon]

Mrs I Robinson: I take the opportunity to congratulate my party colleagues for securing the debate, which is timely and very important to communities outside this great Building.

As legislation stands, the comprehensive vetting system plays a central role in the recruitment procedures of all sorts of organisations and groups. Failure to adhere to the legislation will have grave repercussions: ignoring it is therefore not an option. It is crucial that the vetting system is operated as effectively and efficiently as possible. The inevitable result of inefficiency is that applications are delayed and, subsequently, organisations seeking employees, and individuals seeking employment, are left in limbo. That is what happened in Northern Ireland during the summer months, and it prompted a wave of complaints to be lodged directly with Access Northern Ireland and with constituency offices across the Province.

Although Access Northern Ireland has met its obligations in relation to basic and standard checks, the enhanced disclosure scheme has collapsed. Initial assurances were that the process would take no longer than eight weeks; however, that period has spiralled to over 13 weeks, causing absolute havoc for all those involved.

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

I was contacted by several nursing homes, each of which expressed considerable frustration in relation to the lack of progress of applications for vacancies that they desperately needed to fill. That put the nursing homes in an incredibly difficult position as they struggled to ensure sufficient cover. In one instance, the process took so long that the successful applicant had to decline the offer and seek employment elsewhere. That has happened time and again across the constituencies. In another instance, one of my constituents, who had spent years studying at university, had graduated with a Postgraduate Certificate in Education this summer and who was desperately seeking work, had to turn down at least five offers of employment. Owing to the backlog, her application lay for over a month before it was even considered, and she has yet to receive clearance.

A local community association also contacted me. It provides an after-school club, a school-holiday club, youth clubs and senior citizens' lunch clubs, and employs qualified staff as well as volunteers. The association interviewed people and offered a vacant play-worker position to an applicant in April, expecting that clearance would have been secured before the commencement of the holiday club. However, clearance was not received until the end of August.

All the situations that I have described are the results of delays that have been experienced at Access Northern Ireland. Responsibility for that lies solely at the doors of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Northern Ireland Office.

4.15 pm

Although it is crucial that we do as much as possible to protect the most vulnerable in our society, legislation on the matter is now so profuse that many community and voluntary sectors are reviewing their willingness to provide services, and others who may have an interest are recoiling due to the amount of bureaucracy that is involved. That situation must be resolved as soon as possible. We are facing a meltdown in nursing homes and in areas that deal with the most vulnerable in our society, that is, young children. If we cannot give that group the necessary protection, we are in a great mess. I ask the Secretary of State and the Department of Health to do all that they can to ensure that there are no more delays in resolving the issue.

Mr Elliott: I also thank Mr Shannon and his colleagues for tabling the motion at this time, given the stage that we have reached with the issue. It is a hugely concerning matter. I have recorded delays of up to 20 weeks in getting an enhanced check through the process. That is clearly unacceptable. Not all the checks take 20 weeks, but delays exist. The provision of domiciliary care, nursing and residential care in nursing homes, hospital trusts, education boards, nurseries and playgroups, as well as in early-years provision, are being thrown into near chaos as a result of the delays.

It worries me more that when the undertaking was given that 90% of enhanced checks would be completed within four weeks, some of the service providers warned that that would not be possible with existing resources and procedures. Nothing was done to rectify the situation at that time, and that has created a huge gap in provision. I believe that the provision that was given when that undertaking was made was hugely misguided.

However, there is an opportunity to move the process on. Suggestions have been made that the situation will be resolved and that the four-week deadline will be reinstated by the end of the year. I hope that that is true, but given past history, I have grave doubts as to whether that will happen.

I understand that there was a temporary relaxation of the regulations sometime between 4 June and 25 July 2008. I am told that a further relaxation of those regulations came into effect from 21 August. I would like clarification at some stage as to whether that is accurate and as to whether those relaxations have occurred since 21 August. The relaxations should allow providers to get an indication of suitability from Access Northern Ireland from the initial checks that they perform. That organisation is provided with a list of unacceptable people. Service providers should be given the chance to see that list at the earliest opportunity so that they can decide whether they want to progress with the temporary employment of someone who applies for a job and who is not on the list and then put them under strict supervision. That would at least allow the issue to progress.

Another difficulty is that once a check has been completed, that person cannot carry that authority with them if they move jobs within a short timescale — they must go through the entire process again.

In one instance, one of my constituents made an application through AccessNI, but the job was filled in the meantime. The person got adequate provision from AccessNI and, within five days, was offered another job; but that individual was not allowed to take up that job, simply because the original check could not be transferred to a new employer. That really must be resolved; some sort of follow-up process should allow a check to be carried on to a new employer. Those issues could be helped and improved within a very short timescale.

We need to see an improvement in the service. The Minister has indicated that more staff have been put in place and have been asked to work longer hours to try to resolve the backlog. There must be clear answers; will the problem be resolved in the short term, before Christmas? If it is not resolved, providers will not be able to forward plan. If an employee at a local playgroup or nursing home gives a weeks notice, that vacancy cannot be filled. That is the difficulty, and I want it to be resolved as soon as possible.

Mrs M Bradley: The protection of children and vulnerable adults is, and should always be, of paramount importance to all Departments that have responsibility for delivering services of any type to the people of Northern Ireland. Currently, the caring services appear to be hit the hardest by the backlog and tardy processing and by what that means for recruitment and the roll-out of care. It is vital that the vetting procedures and security checks are carried out in a timely fashion.

In recent months, my constituency office has received many complaints from individuals who have made applications for posts and are awaiting clearance

by Access Northern Ireland. In one case, a mental-health nurse's application took 28 weeks for clearance. That is totally unacceptable. Last month, we received several complaints from separate organisations that are awaiting clearance on various appointments and are desperately in need of additional staff. None of us would condone the appointment of workers without the appropriate checks having been carried out. However, a better screening system is vital.

Minister Goggins told us publicly that he acknowledges that there is a problem and that staff are working longer hours and more staff are being employed to clear the backlog. Despite all those additional hours, it is not clear that the problem has been overcome. Is the very process at fault? At this stage, we must consider that, as more and more requests for clearance come through AccessNI, the backlog will continue, and staff deployed to deal with the initial problem will probably be resited or will return to their previous posts. The problem will linger until there is another round of complaints and — as with many of the motions that we debate — we find ourselves in the same position, in another few months, demanding change and urgent better practice.

In today's employment and financial climate, there is desperation in the air as the credit crunch really gets its teeth stuck in. Even in a stable economy, employment in Northern Ireland has always been scarce, to say the least. However, in the midst of the current crisis, employment is more important than ever before. For families, employment means a salary, which could be the difference between living on the breadline or not. Given that scenario, the vetting process must be efficient, effective and responsive.

None of us wishes to criticise a process that was put in place to ensure the protection of children and vulnerable people. However, when that very process is backfiring on those whom it is supposed to protect, we are left with no option but to use whatever vehicle we can to improve the delivery of that process.

A full and frank investigation into vetting procedures and the causes for such lengthy delays must be implemented sooner rather than later, if we are to have even the slightest chance of providing an efficient service with a response time that will benefit the client and the applicant. In short, it is down to time, which, as the saying goes, is of the essence. Better safe than sorry should be the order of the day when dealing with the protection of children and vulnerable adults. However, if the situation is not put right immediately, each day hundreds, if not thousands, of children and vulnerable adults will be put at risk by the very process that is there to assist and protect them and their care.

The Security Minister must now act to put an end to a situation that has all the symptoms of meltdown.

I could mention several cases and describe to Members how the vetting process is being applied. The people concerned must wait and wait while organisations need them to do the jobs to which they have been appointed; and the people for whom they have been appointed to care are being sold short.

Schools are in the same position. I know of one school that is waiting for 11 clearances and has received none. The school term began at start of September, but those cases have still not been cleared. A moment ago, someone in the Chamber handed me a note informing me that it took two hours to get a phone call through to Access Northern Ireland. What chance does that give people who need to contact the organisation? Public representatives do not even have a hotline to Access Northern Ireland — perhaps they should, because that may help slightly. It is totally unacceptable that it takes two hours to get through to an organisation of that nature.

Mr Ross: I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion on an issue that affects thousands of people across the country. To place in context how many people are affected, some 12 million people in the United Kingdom are employed in jobs that require them to undergo a security check, and more than 6,000 applications are being processed in Northern Ireland alone. The safety of children and vulnerable adults is regarded, rightly, as an important issue, and the Assembly must take it seriously.

The Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 aims to improve safeguards for vulnerable sections of society and is, on the face of it, extremely welcome. It is important that groups and organisations that work with children and vulnerable adults can be confident that their employees are not a threat to the well-being of those in their care. The Order also gives added peace of mind to family members who place their loved ones in the care of others.

However, the fact that a huge backlog of cases threatens people's jobs and childcare, health and education facilities is not welcome. As Mrs Naomi Long said, the threat extends even beyond that to leaders of voluntary groups. At present, the delays are as long as two months, which is frustrating for those people who are being prevented from going to work, and that was not the timescale that was envisaged when the process was established. It was stated at that time that Access Northern Ireland would process the majority of applications within only a few weeks. I know of cases in my constituency of applications not even being on the system by then.

I want to mention one particular case with which I have been dealing in my constituency — with, I must say, little success. I was contacted by a lady who had been working at the PlayAway Nursery in Island

Magee. That is a fairly small nursery that employs only three members of staff. The lady had been working there for some time, but she is still waiting for her vetting clearance to come through. She was told that she cannot go back to work there until the vetting forms have been returned. The nursery simply cannot survive with two members of staff, and my constituent is understandably irritated that she cannot continue in the job that she loves because of delays and red tape.

Mrs Dowey is not alone in her frustration. If the delay causes the nursery to close, the parents must look elsewhere for childcare. When I asked Access Northern Ireland whether it could fast-track the application, I was told that that was not possible. The organisation said that it had not even begun to process the application because it was still working through others that it had received several months earlier. Thankfully, Access Northern Ireland finally agreed to prioritise the application and process it manually, but it still took some time and remains unresolved.

It is not only the PlayAway Nursery that suffers from being placed in that impossible position. Members have heard today of many nursing homes and childcare facilities across Northern Ireland that are in a similar position. As groups experience difficulty in hiring staff, the delays put children and vulnerable adults at risk, because those who are keen to work are left at home, awaiting clearance or, as is more often the case, walk away from the job to do something else. As previously mentioned, most people cannot afford to wait for clearance or rely on their wages to survive, particularly now that current global economic conditions are severely stretching household finances.

My constituent Mrs Dowey loved the work that she was doing and is willing to wait for clearance, but the vast majority of people simply cannot afford to take that option. It is paramount that changes be made to the system to make it more efficient and speedy, so that groups and childcare facilities are not put under pressure to find accredited staff, and so that ever more people are not forced to walk away from jobs that they enjoy. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I also support the motion, and I declare an interest as a volunteer officer in the Boys' Brigade. I, in common with others in the Chamber, am subject to vetting checks. Potentially, people in voluntary services will not be able to provide support to their communities or facilitate the progress and learning of children.

Furthermore, I am a member of Horizon Sure Start, which employs people in the children's sector. That organisation may experience delays. My son, who is seeking part-time employment, has experienced difficulties with the legislation, whereby the employer told him that he could not start employment until the

completion of the process. That process has taken several months.

4.30 pm

Lessons must be learnt from the Soham inquiry, and legislation must be produced and delivered. At the minute, delivery is failing. The legislation is correct in theory, but systems must be established, and the resources must be available to ensure delivery. As other Members said, a wide range of services is affected, including critical areas such as children's services, nursing homes, residential homes, the teaching profession and the PSNI. The Northern Ireland Office and AccessNI are endangering children and vulnerable people. As a result of the delays, there is a risk of understaffing and failing to help children and vulnerable adults. That is an indictment of the Northern Ireland Office and AccessNI, and the situation must be rectified immediately.

Mr Elliott: Is the Member aware that, in some cases, service providers have received personal details of someone other than the individual who applied for the job?

Mr Beggs: I am aware of that; it is a serious breach of data protection legislation and an indictment of the administration that is handling that sensitive personal information.

Successful applicants who cannot start employment will seek other jobs. That adds huge costs to the system such as re-advertising costs for employers and costs of submitting additional checks. That bungs up the system, and AccessNI may receive more applications for every full-time job than is necessary. Removal of that bottleneck is essential.

One of my constituents is experiencing difficulties receiving clearance to become a part-time taxi driver. After six months, his application has still not proceeded. That individual has a clean record and is a respected member of the local community. That is an important employment issue and, moreover, affects our towns and city centres in the evenings, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights. AccessNI is not allowing young people to travel home safely and quickly, and avoid potential difficulties on the streets.

We must introduce new legislation to improve the safety of children and vulnerable adults. Where are the systems, resources and staff to deliver those improvements? The Northern Ireland Office must fix the situation. I concur with my colleague Tom Elliott, who outlined that the system must be altered — even temporarily. Individuals have received approval and, five days later, are told that they must return to the bottom of the pile and wait several months before they consider a similar job in a similar location. That is ridiculous; it is bureaucracy gone mad, and changes are essential. A rolling extension to those procedures

— whereby an increasing number of areas will be scrutinised — is in operation. It is essential that the scheduling is carefully examined in order to ensure delivery and to ensure that our children and vulnerable adults do not experience further difficulties.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion and thank my colleagues for highlighting such an important and timely matter.

The vetting of those who work or volunteer with children or vulnerable adults is one part of our system that is in place to stop unsuitable people getting access to those who are at risk. Members will know that emergency legislation was introduced earlier this year that temporarily relaxed current vetting procedures pending receipt of an enhanced-disclosure certificate, but such legislation was absolutely essential to enable key establishments to recruit adequate staff.

We are all aware of the graphic results when a protective system fails, and we recall the terrible events in Soham and the activities of Ian Huntley. More locally, the inquiry of 1993 that produced the 'An Abuse of Trust' report examined the activities of sex offender Martin Huston, who managed to abuse children in a number of organisations, despite some professionals being aware of the risk that he posed and his past offences, combined with a then lax and underdeveloped system of pre-employment vetting.

With the enactment of the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, arrangements were strengthened, and further built on the provision of the pre-employment consultancy service that was run by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The 2003 legislation significantly improved vetting requirements and created a statutory disqualification list, and made vetting and reporting those who had harmed children a requirement for a range of posts in childcare organisations.

For others, mainly in the community and voluntary sector, uniformed and sporting organisations, the vetting of those who sought posts was facilitated by the legislation, encouraged by the Department of Health and Social Services and was widely prescribed as good practice. Running parallel to Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 was the issue of Part V of the Police Act 1997, which was enacted in all other parts of the UK with the exception of Northern Ireland, despite the fact that Parliament intended the legislation to apply here.

The NIO eventually implemented Part V of the Police Act 1997 this year — 11 years later. That also facilitated the establishment of AccessNI to process vetting checks, which took over that responsibility from the Department of Education and the Department of Health. Part V of the Police Act 1997 also created a more robust statutory process for the police to provide

disclosure information, particularly in enhanced disclosures when relevant, non-conviction data can be provided.

A lot of work has gone in to encouraging organisations to carry out vetting checks and to operate the new processes and arrangements. However, it is regrettable to witness the considerable delays that have developed very quickly with AccessNI. Similar problems occurred when the Criminal Records Bureau was established in England and Wales. It is extremely disappointing that we find ourselves in the same position and that lessons do not seem to have been learned. For whatever reason, that is totally unacceptable and must be resolved immediately if public confidence in vetting is not to be undermined.

We have heard countless examples today of organisations that are unable to recruit quickly to a range of posts and sectors, which causes real hardship. That is also unacceptable, and decisive action is required. In my own constituency, Comber YFC had to wait almost four months before its youth worker could begin work. As for volunteers, there is a constant delay in the process, and, subsequently, people tend to lose interest and move on to some other charities while waiting. It has become rather like a lottery for individuals who want to offer their services — they simply make themselves available to a selection of youth charities and the one that comes back the quickest is where they go.

Following the Bichard Inquiry, new legislation is in the offing in the form of the safeguarding vulnerable groups Order, and in the radical new vetting and barring regimes that are being introduced by that legislation in Northern Ireland in October 2009. AccessNI will play a pivotal role in that, and will process applications for the new continuous monitoring scheme. Current problems will be dwarfed by what will come at that point. It is absolutely essential that problems in business processing and timescales are resolved.

The Minister, Paul Goggins, has taken a personal interest in this issue. I add my voice to the call for him to ensure, as a matter of importance, that the turnaround time for enhanced disclosure is brought back to four weeks. It is essential that he acts, and does so quickly. It may be also be very helpful if the Minister were to appear in person before the Education and Health Committees to advise as to the current position.

Mr Hamilton: The problem with speaking at this stage of a debate is that everything that could possibly be said on the subject has already been said by a variety of Members. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, as will other Members in the House, that is not something that has stopped me in the past, and it is not something that will stop me now.

It is refreshing that there has been unanimity throughout the Chamber on this very important issue. Having listened to the debate, it is clear that few MLAs or constituencies have not been adversely affected by this matter and, throughout the summer and recently, MLAs have encountered a broad range of complaints from various sectors about it.

I shall address the points that were made by several Members. However, nothing that I say should be misconstrued as a call for a rolling back of the structures that are in place — far from it. We have heard about various horrors over the years in the education sector, in nursing homes and in the health sector, and about the dreadful things that can go wrong if checks into people's background fail to happen. That is not a situation to which we wish to return; we want to move on.

I welcome the breadth and depth of AccessNI's strong system of checks into people who work with children and vulnerable adults. That system co-ordinates the work of the Northern Ireland Office, the police, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Education. I welcome that system's alignment with the rest of the UK, and I welcome AccessNI's ambitious targets. I am sure that we all agree that, if delivered, four weeks for an enhanced check is a reasonable amount of time for someone to accept and take up a post and to offer notice to an employer. In such situations, everything should move relatively smoothly.

However, the system of which we are so welcoming is not working; it is badly failing many people. As many Members said, it is ironic that a system that is meant to protect children and vulnerable people is actually putting those people at unnecessary risk because it is failing to deliver its service.

There are many reasons for being in that predicament; however, although many are understandable, they are unacceptable. The setting up of any new agency poses problems. The establishment of AccessNI coincided with the establishment of many community and voluntary sector and council summer schemes, and that probably did not help at the start. In addition, throughout Northern Ireland, there is a general rise in the uptake of such checks. All of those factors have had an impact on the predicament in which we find ourselves, but none is acceptable.

I share some of Naomi Long's concerns. She said that, although there may be particular failings, there may also be inherent problems with the system and how it works that have been inherited by AccessNI from the old system.

I could, as other Members have, recount umpteen examples of AccessNI's failure to work properly for people in the voluntary and community sector, the education sector, and the health sector. I have been in

contact with a great many nursing homes that are experiencing real problems, including, for example, one that attempted to recruit people from India, who were unable to do their jobs while checks were being processed.

Michelle McIlveen spoke about volunteers who are waiting for positive checks to be processed, and many good schemes are losing such volunteers. I spoke with the manager of a community group who said that, having gone through the process of recruiting an after-school club manager in May, his clearance did not come through, and therefore that person was not able to start until September. Consequently, critical time in establishing an after-school club programme was lost, and that club could not start until well into the academic year. Those are typical of the type of problems that are being experienced.

Jim Shannon spoke about how other councils and groups that were setting up summer schemes have lost out.

4.45 pm

The impact of all the delays is severe and widespread. Vulnerable people — including children and vulnerable adults — are being deprived of the services, which are not being delivered. Although not exclusively, in most cases the least well-off in our society are losing out. By and large, summer schemes and schemes that are run by the community and voluntary sectors, for example, are not operating in the most well-off parts of Northern Ireland; they are working in those communities that very much need those services. Therefore, it is the people that those services are aimed at — the elderly, children in care, former offenders, and the mentally ill — who are losing out as a result of the checks not coming through. Therefore, the most vulnerable in our society are suffering as a result of those problems.

The inability of nursing homes to recruit staff is having an adverse effect on those businesses and on health targets in general. Working in a nursing or a care home is not a glamorous job at the best of times; it is difficult work that is a vocation for many people. Given the current economic climate, when someone who is seeking employment applies for a job in a nursing or a care home and finds that there is an inordinate delay in their taking up that post, there is an obvious attraction for them to work in a corner shop or in a major supermarket, for example, where they do not have to go through any vetting process and where the work may be easier or better paid. The nursing or care homes will then lose out.

I am aware of one nursing home that has had to close one floor because of the loss of staff that it has suffered and because of its inability to fill those vacancies quickly, with the result that 12 beds are not being filled. Therefore, 12 elderly people with care

needs could be in those beds and getting the service that they require. However, that is not happening. That also has an adverse effect on the operation of that nursing home as a business, and it does not help to ease the problem of bed blocking.

It was mentioned that there is a cost to an organisation as a result of losing out on a person whom it wanted to recruit — it must re-advertise the position and pay another fee for an enhanced check. There is also a cost to the worker, given that some people may want to take up a post but are unable to do so and are, therefore, losing out on the money that they would earn over that time.

The problem has been acknowledged at the appropriate levels of Government, and, as has been mentioned, temporary measures to deal with it have been put in place. However, it is clear that those measures are not working either. The letters that were to be issued have been delayed, with the result that that process has not been simple and straightforward. The letters are certainly not a long-term solution and are not entirely appropriate for people who are offering one-to-one care. In many ways, the letters are putting the burden on organisations and businesses to employ someone and, in doing so, to take a risk. That is not something that I or any Member would encourage a business to do.

As I said, the problem has been acknowledged at the highest level. That is a start, at least. It would help if Access Northern Ireland information were made accessible to us, as elected representatives, and to the businesses and organisations that use it. Along with other Members, I am concerned that, at times, it is impossible to gain information from Access Northern Ireland and that, at other times, such information is released quite slowly. From speaking to other Members, I know that they have also encountered that problem.

I do not know whether the problem is with the system, with the availability of resources, or whether it is a combination of both. I suspect that it is a systemic problem and that the structure must be improved and supported with the appropriate resources. Whatever the problem, a solution must be found, because far too many people in our society who are vulnerable and in need of the services that are provided by various businesses and groups in our community are losing out. That is unacceptable. I therefore commend the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the waiting time for POCVA checks to be processed; further notes that this is adversely affecting child care centres, amongst other employers; and asks the Secretary of State to investigate the situation and ensure that applications are processed as a matter of urgency.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 14 October 2008

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr McClarty] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Independent Review of the Outbreak of Clostridium Difficile in Northern Trust Hospitals

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the independent review of the outbreak of clostridium difficile in Northern Trust hospitals.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to update the Assembly on the outbreak of clostridium difficile in Northern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals and on the independent review of that outbreak. Members may recall that I made a statement to the Assembly on the review team's interim report on 3 June 2008.

I am pleased to advise Members that the outbreak is over and that the Northern Trust was able to declare that that was the case as of the end of August.

From the outset, my top priority was to bring the outbreak to an end as quickly as possible and to ensure that every effort was made to achieve that. That is why I brought in the NHS's cleaner hospitals team to assist the trust. I am grateful to that team for its contribution, and, indeed, its support will continue well into 2009.

I also pay tribute to the staff in the Northern Trust who worked extremely hard over a long, difficult period to bring the outbreak under control.

The outbreak was declared in January 2008. In February, I asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to carry out an independent, rigorous review, the purpose of which was to identify, as quickly as possible, the lessons that needed to be learned from the outbreak so that they could be acted on.

I made it clear from the outset that the review should be conducted in such a way that would not

hamper the efforts to contain the outbreak. For that reason, its first phase review concentrated on the other four trusts.

The review team produced an interim report at the end of May 2008, which I presented to the Assembly on 3 June 2008. I have now received the final report, and I am making that available to Members today.

The review included the following key elements a review of extensive documentation provided by the Department, the Northern Trust and the Northern Health and Social Services Board; a review of the actions of the Department and the Northern Board on policy development, performance management, accountability and guidance provided to the Northern Trust; a review of all surveillance reports; and a root-cause analysis of the outbreak. That analysis included an examination of the Northern Trust's arrangement for governance, infection control, prudent antibiotic prescribing, clinical care, and environmental cleanliness and communications.

That analysis covered three periods. First, the period up to 16 June 2007 — the day on which a positive toxin sample for clostridium difficile was taken from a patient in Antrim Area Hospital. A second sample that was taken from the same patient on 16 July 2007 was, later, sent for culturing, and it was confirmed as clostridium difficile ribotype 027 on 14 September 2007.

Secondly, ribotype 027 was present from 17 June 2007 to 7 January 2008, but that was before the clostridium difficile outbreak was declared. Thirdly, the period of the declared outbreak was from 7 January onwards.

The methodology consisted of two main parts: the investigation of what happened, and the analysis of why it happened. In its examination of the first period, the review sought to establish the level of preparedness for such an outbreak across Northern Ireland and in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. Members will recall that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust was established in April 2007, following the merger of Homefirst Community Trust, Causeway Health and Social Services Trust and United Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust.

The review team found that the Northern Trust's lines of accountability for infection, prevention and control were clear. The team did not consider that the merger was detrimental in that respect, as there was significant continuity in staffing. Infection prevention and control were high on the agenda across Northern Ireland. That was evidenced by the range of policies that were in place, such as the Changing the Culture strategy, the antimicrobial resistance action plan and cleanliness audits. The Northern Trust was proactive in adopting those policies. It was the first of the new trusts to identify an infection prevention-and-control lead.

The review team found that *clostridium difficile* was being taken seriously across Northern Ireland. However, the review found that there was a lack of awareness in Northern Ireland of the potential consequences of the emergence of a virulent strain of *clostridium difficile*, and that impacted on decisions that were made before the outbreak was declared. That was similar to the position in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Trust was as well prepared as any other trust in Northern Ireland to deal with an outbreak. However, the review found that the trust did not have effective systems in place to ensure that policies adopted by the trust board were being implemented and observed at ward level. For instance, an antibiotic policy was in place, but there were problems with adherence to it.

When *clostridium difficile* ribotype 027 appeared in Northern Ireland for the first time in January 2007, the infection-control systems and cleaning arrangements in the Northern Trust were not robust enough to cope. That was compounded by the significant level of patient transfers between hospitals in the trust, which reflected the pressure on beds that was brought about by high occupancy and throughput. Shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff in the southern part of the trust also contributed to the pressures.

In the second period — after 16 June 2007 — the incidence of *clostridium difficile* increased from August. In August and September, there were clusters of cases in Antrim, and, in October, there were cases in Whiteabbey. There was a fall in cases in November. That may have been grounds for believing that the trust had brought the number of cases under control, but, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that that improvement was deceptive. In December, there was an increase in the number of *clostridium difficile* cases and deaths.

Looking at that period, the review team found that there was a delay in recognising that there was an outbreak at that time. The review team identified a number of possible contributory factors — information systems in the trust did not facilitate tracking and monitoring of real-time trends and the detection of clusters; and there were delays in receiving ribotype information. Analysis of ribotype cases across the affected hospitals could have enabled the trust to identify, more quickly, a pattern that was not fully apparent at individual hospital level.

In the third period, after 7 January 2008 — when the outbreak was declared — the chief executive took personal control immediately. She convened and chaired an outbreak control team, and the review team found that that helped to speed up decision-making.

The Northern Health and Social Services Board provided practical and financial support to the trust to manage the outbreak, and officials in the Department

provided support to the trust when the outbreak was declared. A decision was quickly taken to manage affected patients on one ward. The review team considered that a very positive move and a significant control measure.

The review found that between 16 June 2007 and 30 June 2008, 297 patients tested positive for *clostridium difficile*. That group had been inpatients in the hospitals of the former United Hospitals Trust when the sample was taken. Based on information provided by the Registrar General on data up to 31 May 2008, *clostridium difficile* was mentioned on the death certificates of 41 of those 297 patients.

The principal conclusion of the review was that the outbreak was caused by the emergence of the virulent 027 strain in Northern Ireland, and a lack of awareness of the implications of 027 led to some delays in decision-making.

The final report contains 17 recommendations, in addition to 36 recommendations that were made in the interim report. Five of the final report's recommendations are for region-wide action, and include the establishment of a formal risk-assessment system for emerging threats from specific infectious diseases, to be led by the new regional agency; a review of regional arrangements for public-health advice and outbreak support for trusts; further action on antibiotic prescribing, led by the antimicrobial resistance action committee; a robust infection-surveillance system at regional and trust levels, including regular monitoring of virulent strains; and a review of arrangements for ensuring implementation of key regional policies and compliance at patient level.

The report makes three recommendations for action by my Department: a review of the current system for reporting serious adverse incidents and new guidance on roles and responsibilities in relation to healthcare-associated infections; a review of undergraduate education and continuous professional-development requirements for clinical staff in respect of infection control and antimicrobial prescribing; and a baseline review of all trust cleaning arrangements against current standards and methodologies.

The final report addresses eight recommendations to all health and social care trusts. They cover effective arrangements for monitoring the implementation of policies at ward level; arrangements for healthcare-associated infection surveillance in trusts; development of escalation plans for dealing with virulent strains; daily assessment of each patient with *clostridium difficile*; assessment of risk factors for every new patient with *clostridium difficile* infection and regular reviews of the results.

The recommendations further cover a decluttering review of ward environments; timely and complete

information for patients, during their stay, to meet the needs of patients, carers and families; and the establishment of a system to ensure that patients' views of their experiences are used to inform the delivery of services.

Finally, the report recommends that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust puts in place a comprehensive communication strategy to ensure that the whole workforce is fully briefed and that everyone understands his or her responsibilities with regard to the quality and safety of patient care.

I have accepted all the recommendations, and work on implementing them is under way. The Department's service delivery unit is working with each of the trusts to develop an action plan for the prevention and control of healthcare-associated infections.

Each trust's plan will include actions to implement every recommendation that the RQIA team addressed to the trusts. Moreover, there are several actions to be taken forward centrally, and my Department is working on those.

One further phase of the RQIA review is an examination of the implementation of the Changing the Culture strategy, and that phase of the review has now started.

On 4 March 2008, Members debated a motion that called for a public inquiry into the *clostridium difficile* outbreak. At that time, I said that I was minded to hold a public inquiry, but first wanted to focus on two tasks that were more pressing: ending the outbreak, and identifying the lessons. Those two tasks have now been achieved. The RQIA review team has fulfilled the terms of reference that I set for it.

It has done so in a highly professional manner, and it has completed the review speedily, without compromising the rigour of the investigation. I am very grateful to the team for its work.

10.45 am

The terms of reference that I set for the independent review were wide ranging and open ended in order to allow the review team to investigate any aspect of the outbreak. The terms of reference also had a clear focus on the contributory factors to, and the management of, the outbreak. The review team did the job that I set for it, and we will now get on with implementing its recommendations.

However, some important issues remain. The first is to ask how many people died as a result of the outbreak. The second concerns the experiences of patients and others who were affected directly by the outbreak. I want to restore public confidence in the safety and quality of healthcare, and I believe that people want to know the answers to those questions.

The review has not provided a definitive view on the number of deaths that can be attributed to the outbreak. The Northern Trust has established two subgroups to analyse both mortality and the outbreak. The RQIA review team found that the approaches that were being taken were appropriate, and it commends that work in its final report.

Such an investigation is necessary, but public confidence is as much about perceptions as it is about scientific rigour. Any account of the deaths that resulted from the outbreak needs to be not only rigorous and objective, but independent. We must hear from the people who suffered as a result of the outbreak; that is, the patients who contracted the infection, their families and the people who have lost loved ones. We owe it to them to provide them with an opportunity to have their voices heard, and we need to listen to their accounts so that we can learn from their experiences. For those reasons, I have decided to hold a public inquiry that will examine those issues. I will advise the Assembly in due course of the terms of reference and of the membership of the inquiry team.

For now, the RQIA review team has identified several valuable lessons that can be applied not only in Northern Ireland, but further afield. Our clear duty is to act on those lessons across Northern Ireland without delay. I thank the RQIA team for the important work that it has done, and I will ensure that the recommendations in its report are implemented for the benefit of patients and their families, carers and loved ones.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I pay tribute to the dedication of all the staff who were involved, particularly those in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, for their efforts to contain and control the severe outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in Antrim Area Hospital.

I am sure that we are all greatly relieved to hear the Minister's assurance that the outbreak is now under control. However, like the Minister, we must acknowledge that the outbreak has rocked public confidence seriously. Many people who are going into hospital now have additional concerns and anxieties that they may be at serious risk of catching infections. I hope that today's report will go some way towards restoring confidence in the healthcare system.

The Committee has taken an intense interest in hospital infections. When the seriousness of the outbreak first became apparent in February of this year, the Committee questioned the chief executives of all five health and social care trusts on the extent of the problem, not just in Antrim Area Hospital, but throughout the North. Committee members examined

the action that was being taken to address the outbreak at that stage, and we were minded to hold a Committee inquiry. The Committee also came to the House and called for a full public inquiry. Therefore, I particularly welcome the Minister's commitment today to undertake a rigorous investigation into the number of deaths that have been caused by the outbreak of *clostridium difficile*. I also welcome his announcement that he will listen to, and learn from, the experiences of the patients and families involved and those who were directly affected by the issues.

Can the Minister provide any further details on the plans for the public inquiry and its likely timescale? Will the specialist team that carried out the inquiry on behalf of the RQIA have a continuing role in ensuring that all the recommendations — both in the interim report and the final report — will be implemented? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am very grateful to the specialist team that carried out the RQIA review, and I appreciate the time that it took to do so. That team obviously has other work to do now that the review is completed. As I said, I accept all its recommendations, and we are taking the next step of drawing up action plans to ensure that those recommendations are implemented.

Michelle O'Neill is right that this is a case of public confidence as much as anything else. I accept that public confidence has been dented, and I understand the need for that confidence to be restored. That is one of the reasons for having a public inquiry. It was important for the outbreak to be contained and, indeed, the outbreak has now been declared over. However, we must learn the lessons and ensure that the episode is not repeated and that the public has confidence in our Health Service. Therefore, a key part of the public inquiry must be allowing patients, their families and carers to present evidence about their experiences.

As I said, I will present the public inquiry's terms of reference and the membership of the public inquiry team to the House. I appreciate that it has been said that the public inquiry must be time-limited, and I will ensure that the public inquiry team realises that time is of the essence. However, it is difficult to curtail justice in that respect. I am not sure that I can set the team a particular time frame and insist that the inquiry must be completed within six or nine months.

Mr Easton: I welcome the Minister's announcement; it is good news. I congratulate the staff of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, and I welcome the news that there will be a public inquiry. Will the Minister update us on whether any of the other trusts are experiencing problems with *clostridium difficile*? The Minister said that the outbreak is over. Can he confirm

that there have been no cases of *clostridium difficile* in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust since August?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The figures that I gave show that there were two cases in August and none in September, although there is a time lag in the provision of such information. It looked as though the outbreak had been contained at the end of last year, but then there was another increase in the number of cases. The outbreak has now been declared over, and the precise figures will become apparent later.

All the trusts will follow an action plan, which they will produce along with the RQIA and the cleaner hospitals team. The cleaner hospitals team is from England's National Health Service and has expertise in dealing with the consequences of outbreaks of *clostridium difficile* 027 in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells. That team is working with hospitals throughout all the trusts to develop action plans so that good practice can spread throughout the region. We can benefit from the team's recommendations — and our experience — to ensure that we prevent an outbreak in the future.

Mr McCallister: I join the Minister in paying tribute to the staff who worked tirelessly in dealing with a difficult situation. I welcome the public inquiry, and I agree that it was absolutely vital that we reacted quickly to the unfolding situation. Does the Minister agree that RQIA's unannounced independent inspections of hospitals and healthcare facilities in recent months have been effective and will go a long way to restoring public confidence? Will those inspections continue?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that those inspections will continue.

In January 2008, I introduced a series of key measures, one of which was unannounced inspections of all hospitals. Other measures have been put in place, including restrictions on hospital visiting, a dress code, hand hygiene and rapid-response cleaning teams.

Hospitals had almost become areas of public space; large numbers of people were visiting them who had no business being there. Hospitals are for patients to receive care, the people who provide the care and the people who provide the essential backup to that care. Patients also require the support of visitors, but, in the future, the number of visitors will be limited. One of the problems was that large numbers of people who really should not have been in for a walk were wandering around some major hospitals.

The Department has a policy called Changing the Culture, and the culture must be changed all the way through. The damage that a virulent strain such as 027 can do to the elderly population and the ease with

which it can spread means that the number of people who visit hospitals must be limited. Unannounced inspections are a key part of ensuring that hospitals perform in accordance with their action plans, the Changing the Culture policy and the other remedies that have been put in place.

To date, one unannounced inspection has taken place in each trust, and those will continue. Unannounced inspections are important, because RQIA has the expertise to inspect a hospital that would appear to most people to be up to scratch, up to speed and clean. Anyone who has worked in a hospital, however, will know that there are certain things that should be done and things that should not be done.

Mrs Hanna: I also welcome the news that the outbreak is over. The staff at the Northern Trust have been through a tough and challenging time, and RQIA has done a good job.

The Minister has gone through all the final report recommendations, and those are very important. It is important that the formal risk assessments continue, along with the action on antibiotic prescribing and the infection control and surveillance system. Importantly for patients and families —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is time for questions on the Minister's statement, not for a separate statement.

Mrs Hanna: I beg your pardon. Other Members also made a few remarks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have allowed some leeway for very short statements, but this is time for questions to the Minister on his statement.

Mrs Hanna: My question to the Minister has already been answered. The unannounced inspections of hospitals must continue, and they must be monitored and recorded. I seek the Minister's reassurance on that.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said when I made the original announcement, it is important that the inspections are unannounced, that the hospitals do not know that the inspectors are coming and that a comprehensive inspection is carried out. That is important for public confidence and for the discipline of maintaining a safe environment for patients. It is also important that staff understand that they are doing the job that is required of them. Mrs Hanna is quite right to say that the Northern Trust staff, particularly in the southern part of that area, have had a difficult time. They have responded magnificently, and they have experience that will prove invaluable to staff in other trusts.

Mr Ford: I also thank the staff of the Northern Trust for their efforts in dealing with the outbreak. In doing so, I declare my interest as a former employee of

what is now the Northern Trust, and the father of two recent employees of the trust.

None of the recommendations that the Minister outlined makes any reference to the high level of *clostridium difficile* that already exists in the community. What action is being taken to address that? How many of the patients to whom the report refers were admitted to hospital already carrying *clostridium difficile*?

The Minister spoke of shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff. How much of the money that the Department has allocated to cleaning services has been given to trusts to employ cleaners, as opposed to being given to other people to inspect cleaning?

Finally, the Minister said that public confidence is as much about perceptions as scientific rigour. RQIA has clearly demonstrated scientific rigour in the report. Will the Minister explain how he imagines a public inquiry will add to public confidence, and what that inquiry will cost his limited resources?

11.00 am

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Everybody is aware that *clostridium difficile* is in the community. A portion of the community carries the bacterium. *Clostridium difficile* will never be eliminated. The reality is that we must always be on our guard.

Clostridium difficile was imported into hospitals. Some of the patients on whose death certificates it was listed as a contributory factor were admitted with *clostridium difficile*. RQIA is responsible for conducting inspections in other premises, apart from hospitals. That is the area on which it is concentrating at the minute. We are not complacent. There is a long way to go. As far as I am concerned, there are several areas in which there is room to expand.

When that particular part of the trust took over nursing and cleaning, Antrim Area Hospital had a low quota of cleaners and fewer than the standard number of nurses. I requested that the trust rectify that situation. Openness and transparency are key ways of restoring confidence. That is being achieved through this report and through measures such as unannounced inspections, the Changing the Culture action plan, and a public inquiry. The inquiry will allow patients, families who have lost loved ones, and carers to relate their experiences. That is an important part of rebuilding confidence and of determining exactly how many people were directly affected.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members are reminded that mobile phones must be switched off.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his update to the House, and for the swift action of the Department and hospital staff in bringing the *clostridium difficile*

outbreak under control. I hope that this good-news story will help to rebuild confidence in the community.

I note that the recommendations are to be implemented by the Department and the health and social care trusts — including the Northern Health and Social Care Trust — and that those recommendations are to be actioned regionally. Will the Minister provide a likely time frame for the full implementation of the 17 recommendations that are highlighted in the report and that are accepted by his Department?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have said that I accept fully the 17 recommendations. They include five recommendations for regional action that relate to operational matters, three are for the Department, eight are for all the trusts, and one is specifically for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

All the recommendations are being taken forward. I will expedite them all. Measures will be put in place as quickly as possible. Each trust will provide an action plan that it will follow, with the support of RQIA and the cleaner hospitals team, which plays an important role in the initiative. I assure the Member that the recommendations are being treated as a matter of urgency.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important also to acknowledge the leadership that he has provided as Minister. I have raised my concerns about the *clostridium difficile* outbreak in previous debates.

There are two issues, which remain unclear from the details that I have heard, on which I want to hear the Minister's views. There have been reoccurrences — patients admitted for a second time with *clostridium difficile*. I am not sure whether they are treated, medically or statistically, as new cases. Secondly, it is not clear whether anyone has been held to account —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. What is your question, Mr McLaughlin?

Mr McLaughlin: I have two questions. Is the Minister aware of the re-emergence, or of repeat incidences of *clostridium difficile* in some patients? Secondly, will anyone be held to account?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a high recurrence rate with *clostridium difficile*, and the rate is even higher with the 027 strain. That may partly explain why, at the end of last year, after it looked as though the Northern Trust had got on top of the problem, there was a further rise in the number of people infected. However, the medical and nursing staff are now well aware of the tendency for recurrence, and they keep the matter under review.

RQIA and the public inquiry will decide whether anyone will be held to account. We hope that the public inquiry will restore public confidence in the system.

The 027 strain was a new, virulent form of the disease, and, as far as I am aware, it had not emerged before in Northern Ireland. The systems that were in place did not cope with the challenge initially, but the outbreak is now over, and I want to ensure that no further outbreaks occur. Therefore, all the recommendations must be followed carefully, along with the other packages of measures that I have already announced.

Mr Ross: I, too, welcome this morning's announcement and pay tribute to the staff in the Northern Trust. Some constituents who came to see me told me that they were hurt and angry about having lost loved ones to *clostridium difficile*. What help and support is available to those people?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That is a very difficult part of this entire episode. It is important that people who have lost loved ones, friends, family members and carers, among others, are given an opportunity, during the public inquiry, to provide evidence by relating their experiences. Help and support is available for those people through the normal channels; that is, through the Health Service and through social services. It is always difficult when someone loses a loved one, but, when they lose a loved one under these circumstances, it is doubly difficult. I want to provide reassurance and confidence to the public through the measures that have been discussed.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I, too, welcome the Minister's announcement that a public inquiry will be held. I also wish to add my congratulations to the Minister and his Department, and, in particular, to Norma Evans and her staff in the Northern Trust, who have gone beyond the call of duty in attending to the crisis.

In view of the erosion of public confidence in the health system, will the Minister assure me that there will be no diminution in the resources devoted to tackling the problem in order to ensure public safety and to rebuild trust in the healthcare system?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as the diminution in resources is concerned, we have already had this discussion. I am in the hands of the House, as the resources are set down in the Budget. However, patient safety is very important, and it is one of the reasons why healthcare-associated infections are a key priority.

I have set targets for that area, and they are carefully monitored by the Department's service delivery unit. We carefully monitor everything that goes on, but it is important to remind ourselves of the number of hospital attendances: there are 720,000 accident and emergency

attendances, 1·6 million outpatient attendances, and 540,000 inpatient and day cases. Furthermore, each one of those people may bring with him or her visitors, and some may attend for long stays. That gives an indication of the sheer volume of work that goes on in our hospitals and through our Health Service.

The provision of health and social care is a vital role of Government, and society has a duty to ensure that resources are available to match need.

Mr O’Loan: I thank the Minister for his statement. We are all grateful to RQIA for its thorough report on what has been a distressing episode for many families.

Although the report makes it clear that major learning was required on how to deal with the emergence of a particularly virulent strain of *clostridium difficile* — ribotype 027 — I was impressed by the analysis, monitoring and response to the outbreak by the staff and management of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

“Shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff”

and

“pressure on beds due to high bed occupancy and throughput.”

were reported as contributing to the development of the outbreak. How does the Minister reconcile those parts of his statement with recent reports of forthcoming cuts to front-line staffing?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not making cuts to front-line staffing. My announcements do not concern cuts; however, I am required to provide efficiencies at the rate of 3% a year over the next three years, which means that I will have to find £700 million. Nevertheless, every pound that goes out comes back in, and I have been able to make announcements about service developments because those efficiency moneys have been made available. The fact is that several service developments, of which Members are aware, will not happen without that process. I did not seek or ask for the efficiency process; all Departments are required to submit to it, and my Department is not excused.

Our system meets high levels of bed occupancy, and I am examining our high bed-occupancy rates, some of which have reached 95%. Taking healthcare-associated infections into consideration, we must determine whether a lesser rate of occupancy would improve patient safety.

Concerns about shortfalls in nursing and cleaning staff were centred on five hospitals in the southern area of the Northern Trust. As I said earlier, when the trusts were established in 2007, the numbers of cleaners and nurses that it was anticipated would be required were not available. It is important that proper levels of staffing are maintained, particularly in light of the

recommendations of the NHS cleaner hospitals team and the action plans of each of the trusts.

Cleaners play a vital role in hospitals; they are not just ladies who wear green overalls and carry a mop and bucket. We must recognise that and ensure that cleaners and nurses get the support that they need. I am mindful of the ward sisters’ charter, and, as Members are aware, I am considering ways in which to empower ward sisters. That is an important piece of work.

I mentioned the Changing the Culture strategy. We want to make changes; they will not happen overnight, but I have a sense of where we must go. We must restore patient confidence, and we can do that by ensuring patient safety.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister’s statement. We have all had contact, particularly in my constituency, with those families who have lost loved ones as a result of the issues that the Minister seeks to address.

In my own family, I can think of an uncle who unfortunately passed away, and *clostridium difficile* was named on the death certificate as being one of the contributing factors to his death.

Other Members referred to confidence in the community, but it is also important that there is confidence in the medical world — Mr Coulter referred to that — and in particular in the Northern Trust and all those who are involved in the delivery of our Health Service. That is vital, and I hope that the report goes some way to reassuring them that they will not be made scapegoats and that we will deal with the issue.

11.15 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member must ask a question.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister tell the House what resources are available for the public inquiry? Who will pay for it? Will he also comment on the register of general data that are recorded? Does he believe that that information now needs to be reassessed in order to ensure that it is accurate and up to date?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The data that are recorded, and how they are interpreted, is one of the issues that the public inquiry will examine — that is very important. Public confidence is so important — and it is crucial that it is restored — that I will find the resources for the public inquiry from the Department’s budget.

We have a first-class Health Service and a first-class medical, nursing and allied-health workforce. The workforce of the entire Health Service provides first-class care to the population of Northern Ireland. There is a need to ensure that patients understand that, and that can be done through building confidence and ensuring patient safety. The public inquiry, together

with the review team's recommendations, will provide the essential blueprint to inform the action plans so that all of this comes together and results in a better Health Service. I, therefore, pay tribute to Alice Casey and her team from RQIA.

Mr Beggs: I must declare a keen personal interest in this subject, as my grandfather was briefly a patient in Antrim Area Hospital and then a patient in Inver House in Larne for several months during the period of the outbreak. I place on record my appreciation for the care that he received from the staff and the efforts that they made to limit cross-infection.

Does the Minister agree that scientific certainty and public transparency are important if public confidence in light of the outbreak is to be restored? Does he also agree that healthcare staff worked very hard at ensuring that infection-control measures were implemented, and, accordingly, they deserve our full support and the public's co-operation?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I agree with Mr Beggs's remarks about transparency; indeed, I emphasised that point this morning. I also agree that the co-operation of the general public, who visit hospitals and use the Health Service, is necessary. They must do so in a way that promotes confidence and patient safety. That is a very important message that must be expressed.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that the outbreak is now officially over. I also welcome the fact that the Minister is in a position to proceed with a public inquiry.

However, I am a visitor to hospitals from time to time, and, although all the procedures and strategies may be in place at a certain level, at ward level, whenever visitors arrive there is no one to actually check that they clean their hands or that half a dozen people are not sitting on a patient's bed. What steps can the Minister take at that level to ensure that all the strategies and procedures are actually enacted on the wards? I also commend the staff, particularly those at Whiteabbey Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital, who struggled manfully — and woman-fully — against the very serious outbreak. Should their reward not be more than further cuts to the staffing levels, which were mentioned in the Minister's statement?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I explained that the team found reductions in staffing levels, and we look to remedy any shortfalls. The situation at ward level is an imperfect picture in all hospitals.

Of course, a great deal depends on staff ensuring that regulations and procedures are followed. However, a great deal also rests on people behaving responsibly when they visit hospitals. Visitors have an onerous

responsibility to wash their hands and not to crowd six to a bed.

In response to an earlier question, I mentioned the Ward Sisters' Charter as part of our range of measures. I routinely re-examine that to see how it can be improved to give ward sisters the type of support that they merit and deserve. I am on working that. We must change the culture in hospitals to get to a different place from where we have been. We must ensure that staff do not always approach visitors with trepidation, as can be the case, and that they follow those strict procedures in respect of visiting times and visitor numbers.

Through the Ward Sisters' Charter, I will seek to empower ward sisters so that they are in charge. There has been a drift away from that. I want to ensure that ward sisters have enough clerical support so that they are on their wards, rather than in offices, ploughing through paperwork for half their day.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The regulations, which were laid before the Assembly on 8 July, are made under the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 and The Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The purpose of the regulations is to enable single students with children to make a claim for jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation of their course. Benefit provision is not usually available for full-time students during an advanced course of education, because they are funded through educational maintenance channels. However, because that funding covers only term time, benefit provision is available during the summer vacation for certain students with children to prevent the risk of child poverty. That provision covers couples who are full-time students and have children.

Student couples can claim jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation of their course, provided that they comply with all the other conditions of entitlement for benefits. Presently, there is no provision for single students who have children or a young dependant to claim jobseeker's allowance during the summer vacation.

At present, single students who have children aged under 16 can claim income support throughout the course of study on the basis of being a lone parent. Once their child reaches the age of 16, however, they are not classed as a lone parent and cannot claim income support. In contrast, couples who have children and who are both full-time students are entitled to claim income support in specific circumstances during the summer vacation.

By making that change to the jobseeker's allowance and income support regulations, I am removing disparity of treatment between single students and student couples and reducing the risk of putting the children of single students at risk of poverty.

That change removes the discriminatory effect of those regulations and is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

I hope that Members agree that the changes to the regulations are worthwhile, of benefit, and necessary to ensure that all students with children have the same

opportunity to claim jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation of their courses.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): The Committee for Social Development considered the Department's proposal to approve the Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 on 10 April and considered the proposed legislation on 11 September. The proposed legislation corrects a small but important injustice.

As Members may be aware, current regulations prevent full-time single students who have responsibility for a child or young person from claiming jobseeker's allowance or income support during the summer vacation. Therefore, it is not only those students who are disadvantaged but their children or young dependants.

The Committee for Social Development has fully considered the proposed legislation and feels that it will remove the discriminatory elements of certain regulations, which disadvantage the children or young dependants of full-time single students. The Committee recommends that the proposed legislation be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Burns: I support the motion and commend the Minister for tabling it. The proposed legislation is sensible, and I welcome the proposal to allow full-time single students with children to claim jobseeker's allowance and income support during the summer holidays. The proposed legislation will remove unfair differences in the treatment of single students with children and students who are part of a couple and have children.

The proposed legislation will make a small but significant contribution to the lessening of short-term child poverty, which must be welcomed. Furthermore, we all know that the best way to get out of poverty is through education, and the proposed legislation makes a long-term contribution to that. The changes are necessary, worthwhile and I welcome them.

Ms Lo: I was once a mature student with young children, and I understand the pressures experienced by mature students. Single parents who are in education and have young children face a lot of financial and emotional pressure and should be given encouragement and support. Therefore, I fully support the Minister's proposals. When will the proposed legislation take effect? I hope that it takes effect before next summer.

The Minister for Social Development: I am pleased with the level of support across the House for the proposed legislation. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Simpson, and

Committee members for the positive manner in which they dealt with the proposals.

The Social Development Committee and its Chairperson are absolutely correct that the proposed legislation will put right an important injustice. The proposed legislation addresses child poverty, which Members will recall is an issue on which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister recently commissioned an inquiry.

11.30 am

Thomas Burns and Anna Lo addressed the important issue of needing to ensure that there is proper equality for single students, and I am pleased that they see the value of the regulations. In response to Anna Lo's question, the regulations will not have retrospective effect. The change came into effect on 7 July 2008. Vacation dates for full-time advanced courses of education start at different times throughout the summer months. Therefore, all single students with responsibility for a child or young person were able to make a claim for jobseeker's allowance or income support during their summer vacation this year.

I am certain that all Assembly Members, as well as the wider public in Northern Ireland, want to ensure that the current anomaly is addressed and that single students are treated no less favourably than student couples in the same circumstances. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security (Students Responsible for Children or Young Persons) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Financial Pressures Impacting on Public Spending

Mr Deputy Speaker: In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time when two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposers of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any existing and anticipated financial pressures impacting on public spending allocations in the current budgetary period, in light of the global economic downturn and credit crunch.

This motion is a direct challenge to the Minister to be open and transparent, an opportunity for him to be convincing, and an opportunity for the House to judge his Department as custodian of the public purse strings.

The aim of the motion is not only to flush out any departmental balance-sheet dexterity, but to put to the Minister of Finance and Personnel what I assume to be the universal feelings of the Assembly: that if he agrees that he has come unstuck, he will know that we want to help and, at least, face the consequences together. The Minister will know that at the time of the debate on the 2008-11 Budget, we Ulster Unionists argued that it was tightly strung and based on an optimistic and speculatively positive approach for the economy, property prices and efficiency gains.

One of the main features of the economic storm that has been dubbed the "credit crunch" has been the factoring into the housing and financial markets of unrealistic assumptions. I fear that that factoring in of unrealistic assumptions has also been a key feature of the Northern Ireland Executive Budget, and will have serious consequences for the public finances of Northern Ireland for some years to come.

At the time of the Budget, the Ulster Unionist Party made the point that it was based on an overly optimistic outlook for the economy, property prices and realisable efficiency gains. The early signs of what has become the credit crunch were already apparent when the Budget was being formed, but, unfortunately, our concerns were ignored.

The Ulster Unionist Party argued that the Budget was based on risky assumptions, and that if it were to be deliverable, it needed the continuation of strong

economic growth and a strong property market, near-perfect implementation of efficiency savings, and a lack of bad economic news and downturns. In addition, the Budget was missing the £1 billion package that everyone knew was needed in order to keep us afloat, irrespective of the looming crisis.

Unfortunately, none of those assumptions has proved realistic. Instead, there has been a sharp fall-off in economic growth to zero levels. There has been a slump in the housing market. Efficiency savings appear optimistic, to say the least. All those matters pose serious questions about the Budget's deliverability.

As I have said, Members on this side of the House want to help. However, in order for us to do so, the Minister must share those problems — as I hope he will strive to — because he understands that he cannot respond as though they do not exist. The Assembly must be told where it stands on under-expenditure versus over-expenditure in the distribution of the block grant. It must be told what the current and projected impacts are of the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, rates arrears, deferred water charges, and shortfalls in capital receipts.

Does the Minister glance across to Cardiff with envy or dismay, when he looks at the Welsh Assembly Government's plans to raid their reserves and switch over £200 million from 2009's spending allocation in order to serve Welsh needs and protect Welsh public services in 2008? Will the Minister tell the House whether there are any built-in or built-up reserves? Just to satisfy curiosity, can he confirm or deny whether there is such a thing as an Executive contingency fund? If such a fund exists, will he tell the House what it does and how much is in it?

I want to return, if I may, to how the over-optimistic assumptions that underpin the Budget work out in practice. Let us first examine capital receipts — the Northern Ireland Executive's potential additional earning capacity, which were a key part of the overall Budget. By the end of the first quarter, they were already £140 million below target, largely because of the crash in the property market. Basically, development land cannot be sold because no one is willing to pay the price that was envisaged for it in the Budget.

On 9 June 2008, the First Minister admitted:

“any land or property is worth what a willing purchaser will pay for it on the open market.” — [*Official Report*, Vol 31, No 5, p215, col 1].

That figure has dropped dramatically during the nine months since the Budget was introduced.

Serious doubts continue to hang over the capital receipts that were anticipated from the sale of former military sites. Apart from the obvious decline in its commercial value, investment confidence has been undermined by the inability of three Departments —

the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) — to come to a decision on the Maze. When the Secretary of State responded to the First Minister's query about when the Government would hand over former military sites to the Northern Ireland Executive, he clearly linked any possibility of receiving those sites, and the money from their subsequent sale, to decisive action on the Maze site, which he said had been transferred six years earlier without any action being taken since.

That is ominous both politically and, more importantly, for the financial well-being of the Northern Ireland Executive. It bodes ill for future Budget receipts. It is difficult to see how the Executive can now live within their means because of a series of cash blows that are bound to render their financial provisions at the start of the financial year already badly outdated.

Problems that are linked to the credit crunch include not only rising fuel costs, but nosediving land and property prices — for instance, the reduction in the valuation of the DARD-owned property at Crossnacreevy from £200 million to between a mere £3 million and £6 million. That takes £194 million out of the Budget. Just one wrong assumption, therefore, has cost £194 million.

In addition, the Executive must fork out at least £100 million in Civil Service back pay and at least another £200 million for deferred water charges.

Even if the latter amount is carried over into the next financial year, the hole in our finances is very real. Those amounts were not budgeted for, so how can there not be a major shortfall in receipts?

Compounding this problem of insufficient receipts are difficulties associated with rates collection. At the beginning of July, DFP confirmed that rates arrears of £130 million had accrued because of the failure in the Northern Ireland Audit Office computer system. Arrears rose from £35 million in March 2005 to £48 million the next year, and they had jumped to a staggering £88 million by March 2007. By March this year, auditors found that the figure had risen to £130 million. If that money is not coming in, how can the Budget be delivered?

In light of the very significant change in world economic circumstances, and provable shortfalls in publicly known budgetary projections, it is time that the issue was faced squarely. The Minister's response to my comments about a budgetary black hole last week was a classic example of Nigel “the Artful Dodger” politics. It would be better if the Minister were to admit the problem, and surely we can collectively do much better by trusting in the people

and being straight about the situation. We, in the Ulster Unionist Party, are willing to help and to play our part with him.

To make it possible for us to help, there must be far greater transparency in the process of auditing the success or failure of the Budget. The purpose — and, therefore, the focus — of the debate is to recognise that there are obvious sensitivities in the issue of shortfalls. Where the Minister and his predecessor made dubious assumptions, current events, linked to their poor judgement, have conspired to make those assumptions unrealistic.

The House awaits the Minister's response in eager anticipation.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment No 1: At end insert

“; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to lay a draft budget for 2009-2010, agreed by the Executive Committee, before the Assembly in accordance with section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

The amendment adds to the motion by stressing the central importance of the annual Budget process conducted through the Assembly and its Committees. Only in the past couple of weeks, Committees learnt that a decision had been taken in March by the Executive not to initiate a 2008 Budget process, but to conduct a Budget stocktake.

I have no problem with the Executive deciding how they want to conduct budgetary negotiations among Ministers and around the Executive table. However, the Executive do not have the right to deny the Assembly its lawful role of receiving a draft annual Budget and duly considering it, by means laid down in the previous period of devolution, including affording the Committees time to consider it, public consultation, and take-note debates in the House.

In March, only a matter of weeks after the Assembly had debated and approved the Budget, the Executive were advised by the then Finance Minister that there would be no need for an annual Budget process this year.

Section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 reads as follows:

“(1) The Minister of Finance and Personnel shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget, that is to say, a programme of expenditure proposals for that year which has been agreed by the Executive Committee in accordance with paragraph 20 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement.

(2) The Assembly may, with cross-community support, approve a draft budget laid before them with or without modification.”

Paragraph 20 of strand one of the Good Friday Agreement reads as follows:

“The Executive Committee will seek to agree each year, and review as necessary, a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes, subject to approval by the

Assembly, after scrutiny in Assembly Committees, on a cross-community basis.”

The purpose of this amendment is to make it very clear that the Assembly expects there to be a formal Budget process whereby a draft Budget is laid before the Assembly for due consideration.

11.45 am

Some Members may not appreciate my quoting only the Belfast Agreement, so for their benefit, paragraph 3 (v) of the St Andrews Agreement states that the Executive are the forum for:

“agreement each year on (and review as necessary of) a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes (Programme for Government).”

It is fairly clear and unambiguous that it is, or at least was, intended and expected that there would be an annual Budget exercise. When the House debated the Public Accounts Committee reports recently, members of all parties expressed frustration that we often do not get sufficient real-time scrutiny of spending plans and performance, and are left to see mistakes in a post hoc light through those reports.

If we are to abandon or surrender the Assembly's role as the Budget authority, we are only adding to our own frustration at a time when many people are cynical about, and critical of, the Executive for not meeting, and are attacking all MLAs, saying that we should not be paid because we are not doing our job. Neither I nor my party is prepared to surrender the lawful, proper role that we are mandated to conduct in giving due and proper consideration to an annual Budget.

The argument that was made to the Executive was that the figures voted on earlier this year included figures for the three-year period of the Budget, and that that fulfilled the requirement of laying a draft Budget before this House before the beginning of each financial year. The three-year figures are sourced in the comprehensive spending review, the home of which is Westminster and Whitehall. The fact that it is a three-year Budget does not mean that there is not a pre-Budget report and a full debate at Westminster each year. It does not mean that there is not a Budget statement with debates and votes every year. Why should Ministers in the Executive decide that there does not need to be an annual Budget exercise because the House voted on a three-year Budget? We need an annual Budget exercise.

As Mr McNarry said, many of the assumptions and targets that were presented in the three-year Budget and Programme for Government have since been surrounded and buffeted by significant changes. It would be downright folly to suggest that the assumptions that were made when the Budget votes were taken in January have not been so seriously

overtaken by events that we need not do more than let the Executive undertake a simple stocktake of the Budget, which the Assembly would subsequently rubber-stamp through legislation. We need a full and proper debate on a Budget.

The authority of this House over the Budget does not just apply to the approval of spending lines. In a previous period of devolution, the Assembly passed the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. Members made it clear at that time — not just me as a Minister, but people speaking on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and others — that it would change the nature of the legal budgeting exercise that the Assembly would undertake in future. It was made clear that the Assembly, as well as making decisions on the allocation of spending, would make decisions on assets.

Assumptions about assets were a significant factor in the Programme for Government and the three-year budget figures. We know that, with the change in property prices and the significant change in the overall market conditions, the sort of presumptions and targets about money that was to come from asset sales have now to be significantly revised. When will we hear that those presumptions have been significantly revised?

We cannot pretend that we approved a Budget that is no longer fit for purpose, or that because we approved it, there is nothing else that we can do about it — that it is a three-year Budget, and that is that. The Assembly must be allowed to fulfil its role, and Committees in the Assembly must be allowed to fulfil theirs.

The terms and the timescale in which the Assembly and the Committees considered the three-year Programme for Government and the three-year Budget were fairly constrained. The Budget was late, not just because the start date of devolution was later in the year than we might have wished, but because the comprehensive spending review took place later. Committee members, many of whom were new to the job and to the task of considering a Budget, did not have time to properly frisk, test, and contest some of the presumptions and plans that we were told were inherent in the Budget and in the Programme for Government. That time should have been made up during the annual round of the next Budget and during any revision to the Programme for Government.

During the debates on the Budget and the Programme for Government, SDLP Members tabled amendments stating that the Budget was unclear in its implications for water charges. That was one of the reasons why the SDLP did not vote for the Budget. I predicted that there was a risk that Members who voted for that three-year Budget would be told

subsequently that they had voted for water charges, the details of which would be announced later.

Recently, the First Minister and the Minister for Regional Development talked about the deferral of water charges. That was their first public admission that as far as they were concerned, the Executive and the Assembly had agreed that water charges would come in this year. That was never clarified or specified in the Chamber, despite many invitations to Ministers to do so. The details of water charges would have come to the surface in the draft annual Budget for this year. Many of us believe that it is precisely for that reason that Ministers felt politically motivated to try to abandon or bypass the requirement for laying a draft Budget before the Assembly.

Whatever attitudes led Ministers, back in March, to believe that a mere Budget stocktake would be enough for the Executive and, possibly, the Chamber can no longer be maintained. Given the current circumstances of economic downturn and the serious pressure on public finances, on firms and households, it is not credible that the Assembly will not do its job of presenting and considering an annual Budget.

Dr Farry: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

‘, and to report on any plans to make changes to the underlying allocations within the 2008-2011 Budget, beyond the scope of the quarterly monitoring rounds.’

I am grateful to the proposers of the motion for tabling the debate, which is very welcome. It is somewhat bizarre that we do not spend more time in the Assembly talking about economic and financial matters. The debate that the Alliance Party facilitated on the first Varney Review was one exception to that.

There is a degree of irony in the UUP having tabled this motion, coming as it does only days after the announcement that drastic cuts in front-line Health Service workers are expected over the next three years. The figures include at least 700 nursing jobs. I have yet to come across anyone in Northern Ireland who does not think that nursing staff do a wonderful job, are rushed off their feet and are indispensable.

Mr McNarry: What about the consultation document?

Dr Farry: I hear talk of a consultation document coming from the side. The people of Northern Ireland are quite clear about what they want — they want nurses.

There is a very fine line between efficiency savings and cuts. Efficiency savings are about changing priorities and reinvesting resources in order to find more productive ways of doing things, whereas cuts are reductions in the level of services. Quite simply, the impression is that a knife is going through the Health Service, all aspects of which are suffering

equally with no proper consideration being given as to how things can be done differently and better.

It is no good the Health Minister saying that it is all the fault of the Budget; he accepted what was, to my mind, a very cosmetic compromise when he marched his troops to the top of the hill and marched them down again.

In the year since the Finance Minister tabled his first Budget statement to the Assembly, the world has changed dramatically. There has been a dramatic rise in the level of inflation; it is worth reflecting that the rate today is 5.2% — the highest figure for 16 years. Furthermore, there has been a significant growth in energy costs; there is pressure on public-sector pay; there is the so-called credit crunch and the housing bubble has burst.

There is a wider slump in the property market, and we are in the midst of an international banking crisis. Those are all major changes from the context in which the Assembly debated the Budget this time last year. I appreciate that the solution to, or even the mitigation of, many of those problems lies beyond the control of the Executive and the Assembly. Nonetheless, it is the Assembly's responsibility to take those factors into account in its spending plans and to make adjustments should the wider financial situation demand that.

Today, by a strange coincidence, the Minister for Finance in the Republic of Ireland is introducing his Budget. It remains to be seen whether major changes will be made to the UK-wide spending plans, but I doubt that they can be sustained in the circumstances. I watch with interest to see what our devolved neighbours will do.

The Assembly must be proactive in addressing the issues, and it must recognise the different context in which it operates. The Assembly must balance the books. It cannot run up deficits in the way that national Governments do because it has neither the borrowing privileges nor tax-varying powers of other Administrations — for which the Alliance Party has long campaigned in Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party supports the SDLP amendment. It addresses a specific point that must be made about the need, or otherwise, for a dedicated Budget statement every year. I refer to section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as did Mr Durkan:

"The Minister of Finance and Personnel shall, before the beginning of each financial year, lay before the Assembly a draft budget".

Although the Assembly will debate at least two Supply resolutions and two Budget Bills this year, section 64 implies that there should be an annual Budget statement. I am not a lawyer, and I note that the Department of Finance and Personnel argued that the three-year plan that it announced last year meets the

spirit, if not the letter, of the legislation. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that today. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is also examining budgetary procedures, and I await the outcome with interest.

The Alliance Party's amendment is much more flexible than the SDLP's call for a dedicated Budget statement; it takes the motion tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party one step further. Rather than simply calling on the Minister to detail the current financial pressures, the Alliance Party's amendment calls for adjustments to be made to current plans where it proves necessary. Amendment No 2 is, therefore, a call for action. It takes an essentially static motion and calls for the Department to act to address the changed circumstances. I stress that that process may need to extend beyond the current monitoring rounds and address the underlying baselines and core allocations. It is important to ensure that whatever measures are introduced are in line with the law and address the situation.

The Assembly must reflect on the fact that the Budget was a tight settlement that was based on high expectations of land sales and efficiency savings. Furthermore, new commitments have emerged, such as possible new plans for water charges. The wider community is greatly concerned that the changed circumstances and the tight Budget to which the Assembly agreed will result in even deeper cuts than those currently forecast.

It is worth reflecting that some decisions by the Assembly have benefited the better off. As Paddy Hillyard said on the BBC programme 'Hearts and Minds', the freeze on the regional rate, although undoubtedly popular throughout society, helps the better off rather than the poorer sections of the community; and he advises the Executive on water charges. The rate cap at £500,000 also, generally speaking, helps the better off, and I note that a proposal for a cap at £400,000 is on the horizon.

Some short-term measures must be taken, and the inefficiencies in Land and Property Services must be examined. The situation whereby Northern Ireland and its district councils lose out through the inability of that organisation to fulfil its duties is unsustainable.

12.00 noon

Furthermore, we must consider longer-term restructuring of financial plans in Northern Ireland — and the current situation should embolden Members in that respect. Members must reflect on the fact that a large amount of money is being spent on managing a divided society. Resources could be better invested in shared public services to benefit the entire community. Managing a divided society incurs major opportunity

costs, and the Alliance Party is finalising proposals to submit to the Department in November.

Members must also consider rebalancing the economy. Are we making the correct investments? Are we making the best use of scarce resources? Are we making the correct interventions?

As an aside, one of the unforeseen consequences of the current financial and economic situation may be that the Executive can, superficially, meet their target for gross value added convergence with the rest of the United Kingdom. However, given the help that Northern Ireland receives from its large public sector, convergence would signify a change in the relative positions of the different regions rather than a step forward in the absolute position of Northern Ireland. Therefore, if convergence happens during the next two or three years, we must be careful to look behind the scenes and not assume that we have met the target for the best reasons.

The sustainability of public services must also be examined. In light of current energy prices, it is logical to invest substantially more money in renewable energy than invested hitherto. Also, we should be shifting the balance from private transport to public transport. We are in a bizarre situation where our investment strategy directs 80% of new investment over the next 10 years into roads and only 20% into public transport, of which rail is merely one component. The balance seems bizarre; it was bizarre when the Budget and the investment strategy were tabled, and it is more bizarre today.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Today's debate is timely, given the worldwide financial and economic downturn. Sinn Féin supports the motion and the Alliance Party's amendment.

In early 2008, when the Assembly agreed the Budget for 2008-11, Members were conscious of the tight public expenditure outlook that arose from the comprehensive spending review. Furthermore, Members were conscious that commitments on the availability of capital resource from the Treasury had been secured during meetings with the British Government. That allowed all Ministers — including the SDLP Minister — to agree that the Budget process could proceed on the basis of a three-year period during which the Assembly would take up the reins. For that reason, Sinn Féin does not support the SDLP's amendment.

Since then, additional pressures have, undoubtedly, arisen in the normal course of business and as a direct result of the economic downturn. Given the global dimensions of the present difficulties, our authority and influence on the situation, as a local regional

assembly, is limited. Nonetheless, Ministers have taken positive steps within their remits to alleviate some of the negative impacts of the downturn on the community. All Ministers should be aware that additional measures can be agreed by Departments and the Assembly. I look forward to hearing the Minister of Finance and Personnel later in the debate outlining details of the terms of reference for the Budget stocktaking exercise and its implications for the assumptions and projections that underpin the Budget and Programme for Government.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I will outline the Committee's focus. Given the upcoming financial pressures, the Committee has been actively working with DFP to resolve the equal-pay issue in the Civil Service and its implications on public expenditure plans.

The Committee is also mindful of the impact that falling property prices have on the scope for financing future investment from the disposal of surplus assets. The Department of Finance and Personnel's Workplace 2010 accommodation project, which affects every Department, was earmarked to generate approximately £175 million in capital receipts during the Budget period.

Immediately after the Halloween recess, the Committee will question DFP officials about that critical project and whether those projections are standing up to the turmoil in the global economic climate. In addition, the Committee recently took evidence from the construction industry on measures that could be taken to ease the difficulties in that sector, which included front-loading capital investment and minimising underspend in Departments.

The Committee has been especially concerned about — and has consistently drawn attention to — the weaknesses in the financial management standards and processes of the Civil Service. Those manifested themselves in poor forecasting by Departments, with the resulting pattern of reduced requirements being declared late in the financial year, coupled with rising levels of end-year underspend. We welcome the equally consistent focus that the Minister of Finance has given to addressing that issue, which will result in a better outcome.

The Committee considers that the present public-expenditure context means that there is now an even greater onus on Departments to manage public finances in a way that achieves the highest level of spend within authorised limits and maximises the impact from available resources. All the Committees can have an impact by scrutinising their respective Departments, and my Committee will be questioning DFP officials about those issues at its meeting tomorrow.

In fairness to the SDLP amendment, my Committee has sought legal opinion and clarification on the issue

from DFP. All Ministers agreed that they could proceed and were, at that point, content that the requirements of section 64 were satisfied. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McQuillan: I do not want the wrong signals to be sent out from today's debate, so I speak with some apprehension. Everyone is aware that the global financial situation has changed beyond recognition from when the Budget was passed by the Assembly. Despite the global economic problems, it is important that we tell the world that we are ready, willing and able to do business.

The timing of this debate is unfortunate, as a fully accurate picture of the Budget position may not be available to the Minister until after the strategic stocktake returns have been analysed. However, that stocktake presents the opportunity to examine and fine-tune departmental budgets. As a realist, I fully accept that every Department faces additional challenges due to the deterioration of the world's economy. The rising cost of energy — whether oil, gas or electricity — will affect running costs. The much-needed investment in our water and sewerage systems must continue, and the extension of the deferral of water charges could be considered again as a means of aiding households.

The income that was envisaged through the realisation of assets might not now have the financial yield for which we had hoped, as property prices are reported to have fallen by as much as 30% by the Nationwide Building Society. There is also no hope of the Treasury increasing the block grant that Northern Ireland receives.

The Assembly will require cool heads and good judgement as it faces some tough decisions, so I am relieved that we have a cool and wise head in charge of the Department of Finance and Personnel. The entire process would be greatly aided if some people would stop throwing their toys out of the pram and hold an Executive meeting so that full agreement on planning for the future can be achieved.

I end on a positive note, however. Despite the tough financial times, there have been many positive recent announcements: free prescriptions from 2010; the freezing of the regional rate; and the previous Finance Minister making funding available for the extension of free public transport to those aged 60 years and over. Despite the headlines of doom and gloom, this Assembly is delivering real change for everyone in Northern Ireland.

I support the motion and Dr Farry's amendment.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Few have not been affected by the recent global economic downturn and credit crunch, and the impact that that has had on everybody. Everyone is aware that the crisis was caused by the reckless behaviour of financial

institutions and the failure of Governments to put adequate regulations in place to protect ordinary in-debtors.

We have recently witnessed large banking corporations throughout the world being bailed out with taxpayers' money. Although that was difficult for some of us to accept, in an effort to offer security to people who had savings in the banks and to secure the jobs of people who work for businesses whose money is tied up in investments with the banks, most of us did so. Sinn Féin hopes that similar, innovative measures will be taken to tackle poverty and disadvantage among less-well-off people.

What impact will the economic downturn and the credit crunch have on public spending in the North of Ireland? Moreover, how will important targets in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy — such as child poverty and investment in the social and affordable housing programme — be affected?

Child poverty in the North — approximately 30% of children here live in poverty — is nothing short of scandalous, and in deprived areas the figure is even higher. Unfortunately, low-income households, particularly those with children, and people who already live in poverty will feel the effects of this impasse most.

Such people already struggle to pay for basic necessities, such as food, fuel and clothing, which most of us take for granted. Those people cannot cut back on luxuries or extras; they must cut back on necessities, and given the recent price hikes in basics, such as food and fuel, more families will be forced to go without. A knock-on effect is that more people will be forced to borrow money, causing them to spiral into debt that they cannot afford.

Businesses — particularly small, family businesses and those involved in the construction industry — have also been affected. When businesses take a downward slump, leading to unemployment, people are faced with even more hardship. Consequently, there is no doubt that the downturn will affect public expenditure in the next few years. More emphasis must be directed towards local businesses, and it is important that we consider innovative ways to ensure that all public expenditure here benefits the local economy and the priorities that have already been set out in the Programme for Government, such as tackling poverty and the need to build a strong economy.

How can Members help to achieve that? We must consider how public money is being spent and how to protect jobs in the construction industry and other industries. We must build local small and medium-sized enterprises and social-economy enterprises so that they can compete on an even playing field for

public-procurement contracts for services, goods and works.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: I am nearly finished. Go on ahead.

Mr A Maginness: The Member rightly highlighted recent economic changes and difficulties with fuel and other necessities. Given the fact that her party has committed itself to a three-year Budget and that there will be no discussion about this year's Budget, how can she reconcile that position with her wish to ameliorate our present difficulties? Surely, there should be an annual discussion about the Budget. Will she clarify her position on that?

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for his intervention; however, I will be dealing with such points now and outlining some ways that we can help people. My colleague already spoke about the Budget.

Departments must make progress with the capital and revenue projects for which they have been allocated funds in the Budget and ensure that when the tendering processes begin, local companies can compete with larger companies.

Ensuring that social clauses are embedded in all public-procurement contracts will help to tackle poverty and need by creating employment for those who are disadvantaged and opportunities for local small and medium-sized enterprises and social-economy enterprises. In turn, that will create conditions that will help to stabilise the local economy.

Strengthening the financial services offered by credit unions would go a long way towards tackling spiralling debt and the problems that low-income households encounter when repaying that debt. Offering communities access to key financial services at affordable rates through credit unions — particularly in the present adverse financial conditions — would give people access to the most competitive rates for saving and borrowing, which, given the recent downturn in the financial climate, are essential. Furthermore, that would provide opportunities for the added income from those expanded services to be reinvested in projects in local communities, including social-economy projects, to benefit the whole economy.

Therefore, although the economic downturn and credit crunch may impact on public spending, it is essential that we consider innovative ideas and that the Governments take innovative measures that will ensure that we meet the priorities for tackling poverty and disadvantage that are set out in the Programme for Government.

12.15 pm

Mr Weir: I consider this to be an important debate. However, listening to the Member who proposed the

motion — particularly during the early part of his speech — we heard the phrases “as we told you” and “at the time” so often, and there were so many references to predictions and warnings that had been made, that I wondered for a moment whether Bob McCartney had returned to the Chamber.

Mr McNarry: That is a very big compliment.

Mr Weir: It may be a compliment, because, to be fair to Bob —

Mr McNarry: Where is he now?

Mr Weir: He is a member of the one party to which the Member who proposed the motion may not have spoken recently. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: That will happen next week.

Mr Weir: I do not know some Members' schedules.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This little conversation is very nice; however, will Members please address their remarks through the Chair and stick to the motion?

Mr Weir: To be fair to Mr McCartney, whenever he predicted something — for whatever purpose — at least there was a level of consistency in his approach. The reality is that the dire warnings that are being made now seem to have been lost on the two Ministers from the Ulster Unionist Party when they, as members of the Executive, signed up to, and signed off on, the Budget.

Perhaps the Member who proposed the motion believes that the two Ulster Unionist Party members of the Executive are not the right people and that there may be people with more foresight — perhaps Back-Bench Members of the Ulster Unionist Party — who could provide more direct advice on balancing the books or maintaining employment, for example. Indeed, if the Member who proposed the motion or any Members from the Ulster Unionist Party who speak subsequently are willing to provide such advice to the Assembly, I am sure that we will all take it in the spirit in which it is intended.

Similarly, Members on this side of the House will not take any lectures from Mr Durkan, who proposed the first amendment, about our not being robust enough on the issue of water charging, given that he, in his previous guise as deputy First Minister, and along with the then First Minister, opened the door to water charging, through the reinvestment and reform initiative.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Mr Durkan has had his chance to speak already, so if he wishes to —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: OK; I will give way.

Mr Durkan: The introduction of water charges was not part of the reinvestment and reform initiative — neither as negotiated by David Trimble or me, nor as agreed by the Executive. Furthermore, as a result of my prompting, the subsequent Treasury proposal to introduce water charges was rejected by the Executive twice. I will repeat that: it was rejected twice.

Mr Weir: The reality is that the Durkan tax — or the Farren tax — opened the door to water charging, and it was left to this party to renegotiate the terms of the RRI.

I do not want to be unduly negative about the Alliance Party's amendment, because although I disagree with some elements of it, I find some merit —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I am sorry, but I will not give way; I have a limited amount of time and have already given way once.

Mr A Maginness: Just —

Mr Weir: Mr Maginness will have the opportunity to make his own remarks; I have a limited amount of time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr A Maginness: I just —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If the Member has said that he does not wish to give way, he does not wish to give way.

Mr Weir: Although I do not always agree with everything that Dr Farry says — indeed, I could not even agree with everything that he said today — I believe that there is merit in the amendment that the Alliance Party tabled. Therefore, the DUP will support that amendment.

Although no one would dispute that economic circumstances are tough at present, we must ensure that we do not induce a feeling of panic in Northern Ireland. Money has been allocated in the Budget to cover present commitments, but there is a danger that we will lapse into a state of doom and gloom.

Indeed, Ministers anticipated the tough economic circumstances that people are now facing. Consequently, when he was formulating the Budget, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel put measures in place to ensure a degree of protection for consumers. For example, in anticipation of the financial burdens that people would be facing, he froze the regional rate, which affects hundreds of thousands of people across Northern Ireland, and deferred water charges.

If we are to meet the various pressures that we will be facing, a strategic review of the Budget is needed. Therefore, I support the upcoming strategic stocktake. However, if that is to happen, the Executive must work together strategically.

A certain level of fire fighting can be done if Executive papers are progressed through urgent procedure. However, an Executive meeting is the only way in which the Executive can examine strategically how things can be rebalanced to ensure that money goes to front-line services in order to meet new needs. There is no alternative, and an Executive meeting must happen.

A range of issues, which I will not go into, has been raised, particularly by the party opposite. However, from talking to people on the streets, I know that they are worried about issues such as the credit crunch, fuel prices and the pressures that the economy is under. They want to see the Executive tackling those issues urgently.

There is a need for such a strategic stocktake in the overall Budget to ensure that we are able to maximise our ambitions and provide the greatest opportunities for people. For that to be achieved, all parties must sit down around the Executive table. However, unfortunately — and sadly — one party is blocking that meeting. I urge that party to change its position and allow the Executive to get on with their job.

Mr Beggs: There has been a dramatic change in our economic fortunes over the past year. Many of the factors that have caused that are outside our control, but others are in the control of the Assembly and our Ministers.

Oil prices have been unstable, varying from \$100 a barrel in January to \$147 a barrel in July, reducing to around \$80 a barrel. Furthermore, we are experiencing the credit crunch, the tightening of bank lending, and, recently, we have seen a £37 billion rescue package for three banks. All those factors affect property prices.

Can the Minister tell us what effect that turmoil has had on Workplace 2010? That project has been budgeted to inject £175 million in this financial year to facilitate the long-term upgrade of substandard, inefficient office accommodation.

Furthermore, what would reduced property prices mean for the Budget? As other Members said, a large proportion of our capital investment is reliant on capital receipts from the sale of underused public property. Those sales are already significantly behind schedule due to a virtual stop in the property market, meaning that developers are reluctant to purchase new land. What is the current sales situation, and how will that have an impact on planned capital projects?

Another issue to bear in mind is the Crossnacreevy saga. We should not forget that DFP accepted DARD's valuation of £200 million for land in a green belt area that had no planning approval. That was ridiculous.

The annual Budget Bill would normally be finalised in December. The purpose of the motion is to try to improve financial transparency and assist Members

and, indeed, Committees as we reach that critical period in the annual Budget cycle. Indeed, in light of the recent winds of change, what stage has that cycle reached? Is there not a need for the Executive to meet to examine it?

My latter comments will concentrate on issues that are within our control. Sinn Féin has prevented the Executive from meeting and making decisions. For example, a decision is needed on whether a stadium should be built at the Maze or elsewhere or whether investment should be made in an existing stadium. With such delays, we risk capital funding being returned to the Treasury. I am not aware how the books are balanced at present, but if capital spending limits are breached at the end of the year, will funds be returned to Westminster?

The Quarry Products Association recently recorded a 23% decline in employees over the first 10 months of 2008, with further declines projected. Those types of figures could be replicated in other areas of the construction sector. Will more jobs be lost needlessly?

The planned review of Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14) is another matter of concern. Some people would like to build their dream homes, but modifications to PPS 14 that would allow them to do so have been prevented by the failure of the Executive to meet. Try telling bricklayers and tradesmen about the squabble in OFMDFM between the DUP and Sinn Féin — they do not want to know. They simply want to keep a roof over their heads and pay their bills.

Furthermore, what do those investors who attended the investment conference in May think of us now, given that our Ministers refuse to meet and make decisions?

In its 2007 manifesto, the DUP claimed that all Ministers would be bound by decisions of the Executive and that that would allow for a more coherent Administration. This is not a coherent Administration: we have two factions — the DUP and Sinn Féin — who are more interested in their narrow self-interests than in the ordinary man and woman who are struggling to keep a roof over their families, food on the table and the winter cold at bay.

The Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services is a fiasco and waste of resources, which must have budgetary implications. Its computer system is substandard. It is unable to issue court summonses; it works out inaccurate penny-product calculations; and it requires excessive manual processing. Furthermore, there are staff shortages in the agency and rates arrears are growing. In March 2007, there were £88 million of rates arrears, and this year, the figure is £130 million. The rates have not been collected. Additional resources are required to collect those overdue, backdated rates. The purse is more likely to be affected by bad debt.

Councils — and I declare an interest as member of Carrickfergus Borough Council — are failing to check properties that, it is claimed, are vacant and to value new properties as they come online.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion as amended by my SDLP colleagues. Never has it been more important to work together and to plan for the future openly and with transparency. We are, of course, still in the middle of the financial and economic tsunami. I appreciate that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is probably as confused as the rest of us about what the implications of that are and what the options are with regard to taxation and public service.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): Speak for yourself.

Mrs Hanna: I am speaking for myself, but it is hoped that the Minister is concerned and worried and assessing the implications. *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Are they concerns, or the Member's views?

Mrs Hanna: I could mention my concerns about water charges, rates, fuel and the shared future, and I could look for a baseline analysis of our economic and social profile and how it relates to the policy and investment goals that are set down and how they have been measured; however, I will stick to health and public safety.

I appreciate that there is never enough money, but we must look after the most vulnerable in society. The Budget's increased allocation to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was welcome, and it vindicated Members who said that the initial allocation was inadequate. All Members appreciate that health is an area with infinite and changing demands that have to be met from limited resources.

I acknowledge the resources that went towards the completion of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland), the commitment to targets regarding the moving of patients from institutions to the community, the aims regarding the necessary infrastructure of sheltered and supported accommodation and the targets to reduce suicide. Members agree that no area is more complex than health and accept that a more efficient and effective delivery of services is required, but we must promote good health and coping strategies and prevent ill health.

This morning, we heard, and welcomed, the Health Minister's statement on the end of the clostridium difficile outbreak. The Minister stated that the outbreak was compounded by a high occupancy of beds and a shortfall in nursing and cleaning staff. That is still a concern. Furthermore, I am concerned about the loss

of 700 nursing jobs over three years. The impact of those job losses may be mitigated by natural wastage, as has been said, but it will be severe. People are being urged to work smarter, but they can only go so far in increasing efficiencies before basic service levels are affected.

All Members are aware of the issue of free personal care, which has been debated umpteen times; in fact, I moved two related motions. Many years ago, the Executive agreed to it, and we waited for the then Minister to produce her finalised plans. We have still not received them. I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety agrees with free personal care, in principle, and has updated the figures and the assessment of the costs. We can learn from the experience in Scotland, but free personal care must be introduced quickly.

Last night's 'Nolan Live' television programme and the debate on this morning's 'The Stephen Nolan Show' will give people an impression of the urgency of the situation. Baroness Warnock has proposed that euthanasia should be considered for older people with terminal illnesses — especially those with conditions such as Alzheimer's — and those with terminal illnesses who are not contributing to the economy.

12.30 pm

Members, we must work together in the Assembly and the Executive, and commit ourselves to do what any decent legislature must do — defend and look after the elderly and most vulnerable in our society. We must do that with absolute openness and transparency. We must not allow a debate — similar to the one that I heard this morning — to continue without Members of the Assembly making a clear statement that they care for people, and that they will continue to look after the most vulnerable.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Members will be aware that in January 2008, the Executive agreed, and the Assembly approved, spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments, covering 2008-09 to 2010-2011. Some Members may argue that the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves warrant a fundamental review of those plans. However, when the Budget was being agreed, there were emerging signs of the global economic downturn that we now face, from the rising price of oil to the collapse of Northern Rock.

Accordingly, the plans took account of the changing economic position, particularly the growing pressure on households. Indeed, it was for that reason that the Executive agreed that the domestic regional rate would be frozen and that water charges should be deferred until 2009-10. In addition, further funding was

provided to key public services, with health and social care receiving the highest-ever share of spending, supported by the additional Budget flexibilities that have enabled the Health Minister to make the recent announcement about free prescriptions. Indeed, he gave a very warm welcome to his final Budget position.

With regard to the health budget, accusations have been made recently about the 3% efficiency savings target agreed by the Executive as part of the Budget. I want to make it clear on behalf of the Executive that the objective of that target is to improve public services, with all the savings being pumped back into delivering improved services. The Assembly will, rightly, want to scrutinise how each Minister achieves those savings in his or her Department. However, the efficiency agenda overall is about better services, and the Executive were correct in setting an overall target.

Although significant time and effort were spent in developing the Executive's Budget plans, it is also important that there is sufficient scope for the Executive to review their plans in light of changing circumstances. It is for that reason that we have the in-year monitoring process, which provides considerable flexibility in the course of any year to refine and adjust spending plans in light of changing circumstances.

As regards Mr Durkan's amendment, the Executive's Budget for 2008-09 to 2010-2011 set out expenditure plans for Northern Ireland Departments for the next three years. That represented the culmination of a process that had been initiated as long ago as July 2005, with draft Budgets for the three years being laid before the Assembly in October 2007.

In light of the fact that there was, and remains, no expectation of any material additional resources becoming available to the Northern Ireland block for the financial year 2009-10, the Executive agreed in March this year — as has been pointed out — to conduct a strategic stocktake of the spending plans for this year as opposed to a full Budget process. No members of the Executive raised any concerns about that approach. Some SDLP Members highlighted the fact that Margaret Ritchie was not present at the relevant Executive meeting. However, in accordance with normal procedures, the draft Executive paper was circulated to all Executive members and there was a nil return from her Department.

Furthermore, I note with interest that several Members have said — and Mr Durkan referred to the fact — that it was only in recent weeks that they had found out about the Executive's agreed approach. However, Mr O'Loan was present at a meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 2 April 2008, where Hansard records a department official as stating:

"The Executive recently concluded that there will not be a Budget process in 2008."

The official goes on to outline the strategic stocktake approach.

I repeat that that meeting was held on 2 April 2008 — not in recent weeks or in the past few days. The Chairperson asks:

“Do Members wish to make any comments?”

That question was met with silence — silence from Mr O’Loan and other SDLP Members. Therefore, let us not have any nonsense about this matter being last minute or a sudden surprise and all the rest of it.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, the Member has had his say and he blew it. If he had consulted the Hansard report of that meeting or spoken to his party colleague who attended it, he might have realised that he was talking nonsense.

Mr Durkan: Well, if the Minister would give way —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, you had your chance and you blew it.

The objective of the strategic stocktake is to review progress to date and to allow Departments to register any significant pressures or easements of which they are aware for 2009-10 and 2010-2011. It should be stressed that the focus is on surveying the landscape at this early stage and in determining our strategic approach to managing any pressures through the in-year monitoring processes. We must face the simple fact that it is unlikely that any additional resources will be allocated to the Northern Ireland block grant, and, therefore, scope to make any additional allocations in specific areas is extremely limited, without corresponding reductions in other areas. For that reason, when Members propose plans for extra expenditure, I will be interested to hear them outline the areas in which they expect cuts to be made or allocations to be reduced. That is a relevant and important consideration when dealing with spending plans.

As regards our legal obligation, the Department’s view has been set out. Of course, there will have to be Estimates, and Budget Bills will have to be taken through the Assembly to provide the legislative authority for Departments to fund services on the basis of those expenditure plans.

I turn now to the motion. Although Departments face a broad range of pressures, the most significant are those that relate to the rising cost of energy, the Civil Service equal-pay claim, the funding of water and sewerage services, and the impact of the downturn in the property market on the Executive’s investment programme. Last week, I had intended to set out further details on the state of play on those matters as part of my statement to the Assembly on the outcome of the September monitoring round. The cancellation of the Executive meeting — through no fault of ours

— meant that that was not possible. However, I have sought to have my proposals cleared through the urgent procedures mechanism, and thus I hope to make that statement in the near future. Of course, I also mentioned those issues in my statement on the June monitoring round, and there was an exchange at that time.

Several Members highlighted the rising cost of energy. Although prices have risen substantially over the past year, it is also clear that there is significant volatility in the market. In addition, although the Executive have a key role to play, there is a need for other bodies, such as our own Government and the energy bodies, to play their part. The Executive will, therefore, rightly wish to adopt a planned approach that involves a co-ordinated response across Departments, with efforts being focused on making the biggest difference to those most disadvantaged by rising energy costs.

I am writing to all Executive colleagues to advise them of my plans to deal with the issue of fuel poverty, which involve working with other relevant Departments and engaging with local energy companies. I intend to table substantive proposals to put to the Executive ahead of the December monitoring round.

Several Members mentioned the Civil Service equal-pay claim. We are still working through the detail of that matter and have had discussions with the trades unions. The Executive’s priority must be to achieve a resolution that is fair to staff but which also safeguards public services.

One of the most important, although less glamorous, services that we provide is water and sewerage facilities. The spending allocations to Departments that were set out in the Budget were predicated on charges being introduced from 2009-10 onwards, in line with the recommendations from the Independent Water Review Panel. Of course, those charges were in line with the commitments given by parties in their manifestos in the sense that they resulted in no double charging to consumers, providing a rate rebate of £160 and ensuring that any extra revenue was put towards extra investment — in other words, no water charges as outlined by direct rule Ministers.

The significant increase in the cost of living since then makes it right for us to consider a further deferral. A main reason for the approach that the Executive took to the Budget is that the block grant’s continued funding of water and sewerage services means that resources are not available for other services. Therefore, deferral will have public expenditure implications.

In recent months, I have had discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about how both the burden of the one-off cost associated with the Civil Service equal-pay claim and the deferral of water changes can be implemented with the least possible

impact on the delivery of local public services. Those discussions are ongoing and, indeed, I met with the Chief Secretary as recently as last week to discuss a range of proposals.

One of the most obvious manifestations of the global economic downturn and credit crunch has been falling prices in the property market. Regarding the Executive's investment programme, I indicated in my statement to the Assembly on the June monitoring round that capital receipts from the sale of surplus assets — particularly house sales — would be significantly lower than what was planned for in the Budget. However, the current state of the construction market also provides an opportunity for Northern Ireland Departments to procure capital projects at lower costs. Therefore, I expect the downturn in the property market to result in both pressures and easements.

I have detailed some of the larger pressures facing the Executive, but there is a broad range of issues that will be considered as part of the strategic stocktake. I do not have time to go through all the important issues that were outlined by Members today. However, we will take into account everything that is said in today's debate as part of the consideration of the issues to be dealt with in the strategic stocktake.

The issues raised by Dr Farry, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Ms McCann, Mr Weir, and Mr Beggs are important to greater and lesser extents. It should not be forgotten that, this year, the investment strategy will result in £1.8 billion of capital investment. That money is available to be rolled out and is not being held back by any "squabble", as Mr Beggs put it. Indeed, I was very interested to hear what Mr Beggs had to say on that point.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, I will not give way because I do not have much time left.

I was interested to hear what Mr Beggs had to say on that point because it seemed to be a plea for the DUP to surrender on policing and justice powers. However, I suppose that that is no great surprise as it is in line with his party's previous position.

I listened very carefully to what Mr McNarry had to say about transparency. Transparency and the opportunity for debate are absolutely vital to the workings of Committees and the Assembly in general, and I welcome this debate as a part of that. I would like to have spoken to the Assembly last week during the October monitoring round, but I was prevented from doing so by the absence of an Executive meeting. I hope that that problem can be overcome.

When listening to Mr McNarry's proposals and his comments about a "black hole" in the economy — which is complete rubbish — it occurred to me that

"Tory Dave" McNarry must be taking lessons from his new mentor "Tory Dave" Cameron.

"Tory Dave" McNarry should realise that his party should not be trying to cosy up to the PUP, the SDLP — as it did before — its new Tory friends, or some other group. The Ulster Unionist Party needs to get its act together and stand on its own two feet, rather than following Tory policies.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have only a very limited time left, and I should treat all Members in the same way. *[Laughter.]*

We must identify pressures and ensure that sufficient resources are available to address those pressures. Some Members referred to public-sector finance problems being experienced by the national Government even before last week's announcement of measures to instil greater confidence and stability in the banking sector and, thus, the broader economy.

12.45 pm

In that overall context, we must recognise, as Mr Farry did, our circumstances as a devolved Administration with no capacity to take measures that are available to national Governments, such as borrowing. We must recognise that we live within the constraints of the Northern Ireland block grant; that Treasury is unlikely to provide additional funding for public services; and that there will be few, if any, Barnett consequences from either the Budget or the pre-Budget report. The Treasury will also seek to apply similar constraints on enhanced access to our end-year flexibility stock, with any additional resources required to meet strategic issues.

Therefore, it is clear that the Executive have limited scope, but we will address those issues. There is no black hole in the public finances; we deal with emerging issues through the year as they emerge. We face a range of potential pressures, and, as an Executive, we take the appropriate steps in response to those pressures. As Mr Weir pointed out, the people who criticise the Executive are criticising their own Ministers, who signed up to the Budget, the process and the strategic way forward. They can shake their heads and make all the statements that they like, but they signed up to it as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker: 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, when the first Member called to speak will be Mr Sean Neeson to wind on amendment No 2.

The sitting was suspended at 12.46 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Neeson: I am not sure whether I should declare an interest, as I, in common with other Members, have recently become a shareholder in some of the UK's major banks.

I support the Alliance Party and the SDLP amendments. This budgetary issue came to light at a meeting of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. At that time, the Chairperson and I were singing from the same hymn sheet.

What has been proposed shows the arrogance of an Executive that treat this Assembly with the greatest contempt. At present, the Executive exist in name only. The proposed monitoring process is too limited. It is worth defining the problem, because terms such as "downturn" and "credit crunch" are loosely bandied about. The Government's difficulty is that the value of assets has decreased. Therefore, assumptions in relation to land sales — about which the Alliance Party was always wary — may turn out to be inaccurate. As much of the Executive's future planning was based on those assumptions, there will be a significant detrimental effect.

The downturn in the Republic of Ireland will have an impact on tax receipts and, therefore, on the availability of funding for the national development plan for Ireland, which includes projects in Northern Ireland, such as the Belfast to Larne road. Again, the Alliance Party was always wary that such funding might not be prioritised in the event of unfavourable economic conditions.

The credit crunch has an impact on borrowing, but that applies more to businesses and households than directly to Government. The political challenge of how to ensure that small businesses do not suffer at the hands of warier bankers is not related to the motion. The issue is more one of an asset crunch than a credit crunch. Therefore, the motion is well timed and welcome. However, that leaves one wondering why Ulster Unionist Members consistently opposed the Budget and the investment strategy. The Alliance Party has consistently warned that it was risky to sell assets, to freeze rates and to assume that funding would be forthcoming from the Republic of Ireland.

The Alliance amendment is more flexible than the SDLP's; although, as I said earlier, Members in my party support both. I am worried about, and have cautioned the House against, the real danger that we will talk Northern Ireland into a more serious recession than that experienced in the rest of the UK. David McNarry made the point that the Executive do not have a contingency fund, bearing in mind the present economic problems. Mark Durkan stated clearly that

an annual Budget process was needed. Every other political institution has an annual Budget. In order to function properly, this Assembly must also have an annual Budget; particularly bearing in mind the daily changing economic situation in Northern Ireland, the UK, the Republic of Ireland and globally.

My colleague Stephen Farry quite rightly reminded Members that the Health Minister's decision to cut the number of nurses is like a knife going through the Health Service. He also stated that the Alliance Party has always supported the idea of the Assembly having tax-varying powers. Last week, I was very pleased that Mitchel McLaughlin from Sinn Féin also brought the issue to the House. Therefore, there is growing support in the Assembly for such a process to be developed.

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

Mr O'Loan: I will begin with three quotations from speeches that Peter Robinson made in the House on 29 January 2008:

"I turn first to the consultation exercise conducted on the draft Budget proposals published last October. In my statement last Tuesday, I acknowledged the key role played by the statutory Committees of the Assembly in reviewing and reporting on the departmental and cross-cutting implications of the draft Budget proposals." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p99, col 2*].

"It would be madness for any Finance Minister to bring forward a Budget and say that it will stand for three years and not be changed in any way. That would be a ludicrous position to adopt." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p147, col 2*].

"Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty on me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to lay before the Assembly a draft Budget before the beginning of each financial year." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p149, col 2*].

I could simply say that I rest my case, because SDLP's case for the amendment is based on the law, and the law is as it is.

I wish to refer to 12 pressures on the Budget and changes that have happened, and I will state them briefly. First, the property market has changed. Secondly, there have been some gains and some losses in construction project costs, but they must be requantified. Thirdly, the construction industry is in turmoil, and we need a revised statement on construction spend.

Fourthly, more than £100 million will be spent this year to address the equal pay issue for civil servants, and more will be spent in future years. Fifthly, there may be a further deferral of water charges, but what are the consequences of that? Sixthly, the First Minister gave his support for the fuel poverty task force, but where is the money to match it? Seventhly, is there really no money in the Budget for the reform of secondary education?

Eighthly, there was a temporary solution to the childcare crisis, but what is the long-term solution, and where is the funding? Ninthly, is it really the case that no lessons have been learned from the efficiency

savings exercise that ought to be factored into Budget allocations? Tenthly, Sir George Bain's report on the decentralisation of public-sector jobs has been published, but where is the plan and the money to move 4,000 jobs in five years' time? Eleventhly, Civil Service reform is an ambitious programme, but timings and costings have not been revised. Twelfthly, with the increasing pressure on household incomes, do the Executive have nothing new to offer on the poverty strategy, or the lack thereof? We need a revised Budget.

I will now refer to the Minister's remarks about the matter coming to the Committee. A departmental official brought the matter verbally to the Committee, saying that the Executive had recently concluded something on the matter. No legislation was quoted, and the matter was presented in what might be described as an offhand way, containing the phrase:

"The Committee might be more interested in future developments."

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Committee did not flag it up as a major issue, never mind a legislative one.

Later in the year, however, the matter was raised in writing, and then the Committee realised that it was a serious issue. All the Committee members, including four Democratic Unionist Party members and three Sinn Féin members, demanded a detailed explanation from the Department, and that remains the position.

I wish to comment on two speeches that were made. Mitchel McLaughlin, who spoke as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, referred to the Committee having sought clarification and taken legal advice. Yet, I was surprised that, as a Member of Sinn Féin, he was content to prejudge that advice and to assume that it would not represent the law as we would regard it, which is the only way that it can be regarded. I find it surprising — but perhaps I should not be surprised — that Mitchel McLaughlin, speaking on behalf of Sinn Féin, is happy to give full authority to a DUP Minister to call the shots on the changes that will have to be made to the Budget.

Jennifer McCann spoke about the problems that many people face, and read out a considerable list of things that must be done. She said that we need to examine our spending but went on to say that we did not need to revise our Budget and that the Assembly and its Committees had no function in revising that Budget. That is a ludicrous and self-contradictory position.

It will be clear to the public that we have no Executive, no Budget and no Government.

Mr McNarry: I thank everyone who took part in the debate and listened to it. It was essential that the debate took place, because it is a test of the relevance of the Assembly. The public are worried about one thing above all else — the impact of the economic

downturn on their lives. We should be concerned that the assumptions on which the Budget is based are wildly over-optimistic. If the miscalculations are of the order of the Crossnacreevy situation, we are in trouble.

I thank Mark Durkan for fleshing out the detail of the annual Budget process, which should be taking place in the Assembly. I also wish to thank Dr Farry for drawing our attention to the fact that inflation now stands at 5.2% and that energy costs have risen significantly since the Budget was introduced. However, I wish that he would resist taking cheap shots after complimenting people; I suspect that Members switched off after that and did not hear the important things that he was saying. Perhaps I should forgive the Alliance Party Members; it may be that the grubby deals for an Executive position are going to their heads.

I welcome Mitchel McLaughlin's comments; he gave details of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's engagement with the Department, especially with regard to the effect that falling property prices is having on receipts, and the assumptions that underpin the Budget.

Peter Weir's message of "Don't panic; don't panic", like Corporal Jones in 'Dad's Army', produced almost as much amusement as his comment that he was willing to accept the advice of any other party. However, I welcome Mr Weir's acceptance of the need for a strategic stocktake on budgetary presumptions. Again, despite his knack for knocking his former party, he left out the agony that his new party is going through over the talk about Peter Robinson's and Nigel Dodds's local difficulties.

I thank my colleague Roy Beggs for pointing to the fact that DFP accepted DARD's valuation of the Crossnacreevy site at £200 million. How can we have confidence in the professionalism of DFP's acceptance of that valuation of green-belt land at those levels? I also thank Mr Beggs for highlighting the shambles that pertains in the Rate Collection Agency. Members misinterpreted what Mr Beggs said; perhaps when they read his remarks in Hansard they will see that they referred directly to the Sinn Féin party and to none other.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel rightly drew attention to the Executive's strategic stocktake; that is the whole point of this debate. The Executive are conducting the stocktake, not this democratically elected Assembly.

Mr Durkan: How and when?

Mr McNarry: Indeed. As part of its report on the Executive's draft Budget 2008-2012, the Department asked Committees for their views on the details provided in respect of departmental budget submissions, and, in particular, whether any additional information would have been of use. I do not know about other

Committees, but the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, in response to that question, said:

“The Committee is of the view that the level of detail provided in the draft Budget document made it very difficult for the Committee to comment constructively”

on the draft Budget. In particular, it was difficult for the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure to assess the impact of funding when the draft Budget did not make clear which specific bids would be met. I have no doubt that the Minister will take note.

2.15 pm

The Minister also draws attention to the normal in-year process, which occurs automatically in the DFP system. However, these are not normal circumstances; they are once-in-a-century circumstances. We are in the midst of a stock-market crash on a par with that of 1929. The Minister speaks of opportunities presented by falling costs in the construction sector, as well as the threats posed by a reduction in the proceeds and receipts from property sales. Are those equal? I do not think so.

I was disappointed in the Minister today; I am glad he is here, but he has not inspired confidence. It was not just a question of style or presentation; it was the lack of a convincing argument with substance.

Speaking last week about the world economic crisis, the American inventor, Warren Buffett, said:

“It’s only when the tide goes out that you learn who’s been swimming naked.”

Minister, the tide is rolling in, and we wonder whether you will have a wetsuit on or just your flippers. On that note, I ask the House to support the integrity of the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I put the Question, I advise Members that, whether amendment No 1 is made or not, the Question on amendment No 2 will still be put.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 34; Noes 52.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Mr O’Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Mr O’Loan.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Ms S Ramsey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendmant No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any existing and anticipated financial pressures impacting on public spending allocations in the current budgetary period, in light of the global economic downturn and credit crunch, and to report on any plans to make changes to the underlying allocations within the 2008-2011 Budget, beyond the scope of the quarterly monitoring rounds.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Teachers' Strike at Movilla High School, Newtownards

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, for the Minister of Education.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the action she has taken to resolve the teachers' strike at Movilla High School in Newtownards.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am very concerned by the recent developments at Movilla High School, which are now adversely affecting the education of all pupils at the school. It is disappointing that the issue has come to this point. It would be better for all parties if it had not come to such public attention. Teachers need to be back doing what they do, teaching; and pupils need to be back in the classroom, being educated. That must happen quickly.

Ach sin mar atá sé. Tá sé riachtanach go bhfaigheann gach dalta an t-oideachas atá sé nó sí i dteideal a fháil — gach uile dhalta. Tá sé de dhualgas orainn freisin a chinntiú go mbíonn múinteoirí ábalta a ndualgas féin a chomhlíonadh i dtimpeallacht atá sábháilte.

That translates as: but we are where we are. It is essential that every pupil receives the education to which he or she is entitled, and that means every pupil. We also have a duty to ensure that teachers are able to perform their duties in a safe environment.

I am aware that a stalemate situation has developed, and I am urging all those involved to work together in order to find a speedy resolution so that the education of all the pupils at Movilla High School can return to normality as quickly as possible.

We need to see this issue resolved, whether by the offer of the Children's Commissioner to mediate, the auspices of the Labour Relations Agency, or through local dialogue. I also ask that the privacy of the pupil and the pupil's family be respected by all involved, in this House and by the media. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a cause for regret that contributions on this issue are being confined to one constituency, considering the fact that it was a Member from another constituency, who is the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, who tabled the private notice question.

The issue of teacher assaults would have benefited from a wider range of contributions in the House. It was noted in a recent report by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will answer the point of order if the Member will please resume his seat.

Members will know that in every case the choice of questions and supplementary questions is for the direction of the Speaker. The Speaker decided that this private notice question is related to a constituency matter and that other Members will not be called in that situation. I now want to resume the debate.

Mr Storey: I express some concern because I had asked the Minister to detail to the House what action she had taken with regard to this serious situation. Unfortunately, the Minister has not detailed what she has done to try to resolve the situation. Obviously, people want a resolution.

Several questions flow from the dispute. First, can the Minister confirm that the pupil who is at the centre of the dispute is legally enrolled in the school? I concur with her comment that the privacy of the pupil and family is paramount. Obviously, Members are concerned about the pupil who is at the centre of the controversy. Secondly, can she confirm that, in a statement, the South Eastern Education and Library Board agreed to suspend the implementation of complete reduction of salaries for teachers who are involved in the dispute? It seems that the issue has become the subject of another debate. From the union's point of view, that is regrettable. Thirdly, can the Minister confirm that she will speak to the unions concerned about the course of action that she has taken?

The outcome must not, in any way, detract from the safety of staff in any school. However, as Chairman of the Education Committee, I fear that a precedent has been set about how such issues are dealt with, given that there has been a significant increase in the number of assaults in schools during the past several years and the fact that other schools currently experience the same situation when pupils are suspended. Remember that the pupil who is at the centre of the dispute is back at school legally. The Assembly must ensure that a precedent is not set for staff to take action that disrupts the education of other pupils — 540 other pupils in the case of Movilla High School.

Mr McNarry: The most important concern in this unfortunate situation is that the provision of education at the school must continue. The Assembly must hear the Minister's assurance that there will be no lasting interference to that crucial provision.

The issue is, of course, of grave concern because it is not clear whether a police investigation is under way in respect of the alleged assault and the complaint that arose from that allegation. Perhaps the Minister can provide that information. If such an investigation is under way, what primacy does it have? Is it intertwined with the Minister's action? If there is no police

investigation, surely parents should ask why not. Therein may lie the answer.

I have listened to the Minister's comments. I am grateful for what she has said. However, she has not said whom she supports in this situation: is it the pupil who is at the centre of the dispute; all other pupils; one set of parents; all other parents; the school; its principal; its board; or the trade unions? The Minister must tell the Assembly now what her position is and whom she supports. Members will then have an inkling of what action and direction she is likely to take.

Mr McCarthy: Is the Minister not ashamed to lead a Department of Education in Northern Ireland that presides over the events at Movilla High School in Newtownards where pupils are being denied the teaching and education to which they are entitled? The problem did not arise overnight; it has existed for a considerable time. Surely, her Department should have sorted the problem out by whatever means necessary long before it reached the point of no return, whereby pupils are being denied their education and there have been accusations of assault on a teacher.

We cannot accept such a situation. Will the Minister enlighten the Assembly as to what she is doing in the immediate term to solve the problem?

Mr Shannon: It is with regret that I put this question to the Minister; furthermore, it is put from a position of concern. As other Members said, this is a most delicate issue. However, it is vital for the pupil concerned, and for all the pupils of the school, that welfare and education are taken care of.

Is the Minister aware of the discussions that have taken place between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the unions? A solution was put forward to resolve the dispute and end the strike. What steps is the Minister taking to deliver a solution? A solution exists, if all the parties involved will grasp it.

The Minister of Education: Members have asked me a couple of direct questions. I will answer those that I can, and I will explain why, in view of the situation, it would be inappropriate to answer others.

The young person concerned is under 18 and we must be careful of putting undue focus on any school pupil. In my statement, I stressed the importance of pupils and teachers being able to operate in a safe environment. As people know, my Department takes a very serious view of assaults on teachers; the bullying of young people; and of the need to provide emotional support for young people.

With respect to the Member who asked whom I support, the question is, rather, how we resolve the issue so that everyone gets back to school — teachers and pupils alike — while maintaining respect for everyone's rights. For me, that is paramount.

I shall answer other questions. The pupil is legally enrolled in the school. The board has not agreed to suspend the reduction in salaries; however, it has agreed to review its decision to suspend pay if one of the parties involved agrees to mediation.

Mediation can happen in several ways, and I outlined three in my statement. The first is through the good offices of the Children's Commissioner; the second is the potential for local dialogue, which would, obviously, involve the board; and the third is through the Labour Relations Agency. It is not for me to say which is the correct option; however, I must insist that everyone sits down, starts talking and resolves the difficulty. We cannot have a situation where 540 children are out of school, or one in which people feel that they work in an unsafe environment.

I am aware that efforts have been made to resolve the matter, and that much hard work has gone into those efforts. There is a way through the impasse, and we must find it. Rather than get involved in a blame game, let us calm the situation, focus on a resolution and ensure that we do not focus on one particular child. To do so would be unfair.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: No further supplementary questions will be asked.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Climate Change

Mr Deputy Speaker: In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time where two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes have been allowed for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

2.45 pm

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that the Minister of the Environment continues to ignore the mounting evidence that climate change is a significant issue, and

(i) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Department of the Environment recognises recent scientific evidence and sets challenging targets for carbon reductions and sustainable development across all departments; and

(ii) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the principles and priorities for the Department of the Environment contained in the Programme for Government, and approved by the Assembly, are reflected accurately by both the Minister of the Environment and departmental officials, for example, when attending North-South and East-West ministerial meetings.

The motion is essentially about the growing concerns that exist about the environment. Central to it are concerns that human activity contributes to damaging the environment, particularly through CO₂ emissions, which are causing global warming, which in turn affects climate change. In the face of overwhelming evidence about that link, our Environment Minister — whom I welcome to the debate — has rejected, on numerous occasions, the fact that human activities have caused climate change.

Two amendments have been tabled. Amendment No 2, tabled by the Alliance Party, pretty much reflects our views, and we have no difficulty in accepting it. Amendment No 1 is detailed; nevertheless, it seeks to focus attention away from the Minister's role. Although the amendment addresses some laudable matters, such as energy saving and sustainable development, it avoids the key issue, which is that the Minister of the Environment continues to equivocate about the contribution of human activity to global warming. The evidence that human actions have contributed to climate change is beyond question, and that is why we are calling on the Environment Minister to adopt a more serious approach.

Time does not permit me to go into the scientific evidence today — and I am not a scientist — but it is

on record and well documented. I refer Members to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has been going for 10 years, and has issued a number of reports. Professor Neil Adger is a leading author with the IPCC, and he works at the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia. He states:

“Anyone who disputes these facts is either a fool or is seeking deliberately to mislead for political or other purposes. The IPCC is the most rigorous science available — on its evidence every country, province and indeed individual needs to act now — anything else is a dereliction of our duty of care to ourselves and our future”.

To bring that home; in April 2008, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, said:

“Current predictions on climate change suggest greater long-term impacts on health than any current public health priority.”

He continued:

“We must tackle this issue on all fronts, reducing our contribution to the problem and responding to the effects of climate change is a shared international responsibility.”

Although climate change is a technical, scientific, health and economic issue, it is also a moral one. As some Members know, in global terms, the present level of carbon emissions can undermine the well-being of millions of people today and condemn further generations to live in an inhospitable climate.

In reflecting on global warming, one of the great tragedies and ironies is that the poor — those who have contributed least to it — will suffer most, especially those in areas that are most susceptible to rising sea levels. Bangladesh is a case in point. Such areas are inhabited by the poor, who have the least resources available to them to change their life situations. Our neighbouring Governments in the Republic of Ireland and the UK have joined with industrial countries around the world to tackle climate change.

All those involved are making some effort to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, which are responsible for carbon emissions. Government spokespersons from those countries have reinforced the message that people have to change their habits and reduce their carbon footprint if the environment is to be saved.

It is time for a serious approach to climate change by all concerned, including the head of the Department of the Environment — the Minister — and his officials. Playing political football with environmental issues is not acceptable. It is not good enough to adopt the strategy that if it is not going to happen on my watch, I will leave it to my successor to deal with, even though I know that what is done now will only exacerbate the problem and create a potentially irreversible situation.

People today must live in a way that is just and fair for all — and for future generations of human beings and all other forms of life on the planet. We, in

Northern Ireland, have opportunities to do things in other ways. We can reduce our carbon emissions without reducing or harming our prosperity. There are abundant resources to exploit: wind, tide, and biomass are possible alternative sources of energy. Domestic renewable sources of energy, such as solar panels and small wind turbines, can make a very significant difference.

I have difficulty with the DUP amendment. How can ordinary people seriously be expected to make a contribution to energy savings in their homes and small businesses when the entire Department is not serious about the issue? The Assembly needs to lead the way.

In Northern Ireland, as is the case around the world, large energy-reliant businesses such as power stations are the main contributors to the problem of carbon emissions. Those businesses are now required to make a contribution to reducing the carbon footprint. What must they make of the dilemma that, on the one hand, they are being asked to make a contribution while, on the other, the Minister of the Environment has been frequently quoted as saying that he does not believe that their activities, or the production of emissions, make any significant contribution to climate change?

I will finish with the words of the theologian Leonardo Boff, who, when speaking about environmental damage, said that unless we get to grips with this issue:

"There will be no new Noah's Ark to save some and leave the rest to perish. We all either sink or swim together".

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

"recognises that climate change is occurring, is a significant issue and that mankind should contribute to a solution to the extent to which it is contributing to the problem; calls on the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of the Environment to take action to minimise the impact of this on individuals, households and small and medium sized enterprises; further recognises that the Department of the Environment has already committed to targets in this area in the Programme for Government; and further calls on the Minister of the Environment to promote the Energy Saving Trust and the Northern Ireland Energy Agency in order to help prevent further financial pressure on households."

I welcome the opportunity to have a full and open debate on climate change, as we have not often had the opportunity to do so. I am disappointed by Mr Gallagher's opening comments. He did not say that his primary concern was the environment or his constituents: he said that the central rationale behind the motion was to target the Minister.

The argument in the motion is that the Minister is ignoring the significant impact of climate change; he is not. Nor is the Minister denying that climate change is happening; climate change is a fact. It has always happened. It is a natural phenomenon whereby global

temperatures have risen and fallen throughout the centuries; from the ice age and, more recently, between the 1940s and the 1970s when global temperatures have fallen.

The real argument — not only in the House — is about the extent to which mankind adds to the effects of climate change. My amendment accepts that the climate is changing and calls on the Minister to take appropriate action to minimise the impact on the population.

The impact of climate change is clear, and, over recent years, Members have witnessed severe flooding in parts of Northern Ireland, including parts of my constituency. I visited many of the affected houses and saw the damage caused at first hand. Mr Gallagher said that the Assembly must act now, and people expect the Executive to act immediately, as they did after the floods.

However, it is not simply a matter of financial assistance. Other practical decisions must be taken to reduce the impact of climate change: new housing developments should not be built on flood plains, and a certain amount of flood water should remain on the site of new developments to reduce any future surge on the water table. Such practical measures recognise the problem and aim to find a solution that can make a difference to people.

People do not want only targets; they want action. However, let us not forget that some targets were set in the Programme for Government that was passed by the Assembly. The responsibility for dealing with climate change does not rest with a single Department. Rather, several Departments, including the Department of the Environment, have a role to play. The Executive, therefore, are collectively responsible for climate change.

The original motion refers to the North/South Ministerial Council, but that has no mandate to discuss climate change. It also refers to the British-Irish Council, which has only limited scope to discuss the issue. My amendment calls on the Minister to work with groups that can help to reduce the amount of energy that people use in their homes and thereby save money.

Now is not the time to hit people, or businesses, with higher taxes disguised as environmental incentives. The burden is heavy enough, and the Assembly should instead encourage people to take measures that will be to their practical advantage. I listened to Mr Gallagher question why individuals would do so, and the simple answer is that it would save them money. The Assembly should not, particularly given the current global financial crisis, burden businesses to the extent that they lose any competitive advantage against foreign competitors, not only for the sake of the businesses but for their employees.

That is not to say that individuals cannot take action, but it is important to send a clear message that saving energy does not necessarily hit the pockets of constituents. Unfortunately, the idea of being environmentally friendly is often associated with higher costs. The prime example of that is the introduction of green taxes in Europe and elsewhere. Often, those taxes have little to do with saving the environment and much more to do with generating more money for the Government. Therefore, people are rightly sceptical about that approach.

The motion also refers to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which claims that 2,500 scientists agree that CO₂ is responsible for global warming and that humans are the culprits. Al Gore's infamous film, 'An Inconvenient Truth', made as he attempted to set himself up as a potential US President, supported that view. However, it should not be forgotten that, the last time that he ran for president, he claimed to have invented the Internet, and the real "inconvenient truth" was that he did not.

It is important in any debate on climate change to recognise that people have different views on its cause, although Governments across the world have been quick to implement policies on the back of the opinion of a majority of scientists whose data are questionable. As a result of the focus on climate change in recent years, many nations throughout the world have spent billions of pounds of taxpayers' money. That is particularly relevant at a time when the world faces dire financial problems.

The Assembly must be mindful of the impact of Government's decisions on people, but, unfortunately, some Members are not. Indeed, last month, the chairperson of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the UN's top climate scientist, Dr Rajendra Pachauri, urged people to cut their meat consumption as a way to combat climate change.

Members must recognise the potential outcome of that. Mad cow disease was once the greatest threat to the meat industry; now it seems to be mad scientists. Everyone is becoming too used to the extreme fringes of the environmental lobby coming up with ideas that restrict personal freedoms and result in having a costly impact on the pockets of individuals. Those scientists now target the meat sector.

Individuals can decide for themselves what action to take to be sensitive to the environment. Furthermore, the comments of that top climate scientist could have a serious impact on the farming industry here, an industry that has already taken several measures to reduce the environmental damage caused by its activities. The meat industry in Northern Ireland employs thousands of people and generates millions of pounds annually in revenue. The situation in industry

is difficult enough without such outrageous comments being made.

However, individuals can take several steps to reduce their energy consumption and save money. We must ensure that being environmentally friendly is cost-effective for individuals — that will make energy conservation a more attractive proposition. Simple measures such as turning a thermostat down by 1°C can save the average home 10% of its fuel bill. Cavity-wall and loft insulation, energy-saving light bulbs, draft proofing, heating controls and water-tank insulation are all good ways of saving energy in the home, helping to reduce energy consumption and, as a result, helping to save money.

3.00 pm

Several initiatives, such as the cavity-wall cashback scheme, can save money and reduce energy consumption. In the current dire economic situation, a saving of a few hundred pounds a year can go a long way. Furthermore, it is important that we reduce the region's energy dependency. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Nigel Dodds, referred to the significant issue of rising energy costs in an earlier debate. Therefore, amendment No 1 calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with groups such as the Energy Saving Trust and the Northern Ireland Energy Agency to actively promote opportunities for taxpayers to save money.

It is crucial that we change our sensitivity to the environment and to energy consumption and move away from the view that big Government tell us what to do or we get taxed, to a situation where individuals, businesses and householders are given incentives to conserve energy. The agencies that I mentioned give individuals the opportunity to implement simple changes — which are sensitive to the environment and save money — to their everyday routine. It is important that the Assembly identifies the problems and suggests solutions. I urge the House to support amendment No 1, which recognises the challenges that we face and identifies practical steps that individuals and the Government can take that will not have a negative impact on people during this difficult economic time.

Mr B Wilson: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

"(iii) calls on all Ministers to ensure that their Departments recognise the significance of man-made climate change, particularly in the promotion of sustainability in transport, planning, housing and energy consumption."

I thank Mr Gallagher for tabling the motion. It is important that the Assembly has an opportunity to debate climate change, which, along with the Minister's controversial views, has been in the news during the past few months.

In October 2007, David Ford and I tabled a motion on climate change that demanded that climate change and sustainability be central to all Executive policy. Although the current Environment Minister spoke against that motion, the Assembly agreed to it unanimously. However, I must ask what impact that has had on Executive decisions. As far as I can see, it has had none. It appears that in making decisions, the Executive have ignored sustainability and the threat of climate change. For example, the amount of money that will be spent on public transport in the next 10 years will not increase. In fact, the Department for Regional Development is obsessed with building more roads, which will in turn create more traffic. Alternative measures, such as public transport, should be examined. There has been no leadership on the matter.

Planners continue to give permission to build houses on flood plains. In the past few months, the Assembly has given £2 million of grants to householders who live near riverbanks and have been flooded out by heavy rain. Again, action should be taken on that matter, but nothing has happened.

Although the Executive have taken some action, it has been negative. Direct rule Ministers introduced Reconnect grants to help householders to create microgeneration systems in their houses. However, the abolition of that initiative was one of the first things that was done under the Budget. If we want to encourage people to use alternative energy and reduce their carbon footprint, the last thing that we should do is discourage the development of microgeneration systems.

The previous Administration established the Renewable Energy Installer Academy, which was funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and provided courses on how to install the new microgeneration systems. However, the people who received the training found that jobs disappeared because the Reconnect grants on which those jobs were dependent were no longer available.

Renewable energy systems have great potential. In Germany, 250,000 people are employed to install and create such systems. Our current figure is around 100, so we have not tapped that potential. The Executive abolished the previous plans to set mandatory targets and to install renewable systems in new housing.

Furthermore, the Executive have totally failed to show any leadership on the issue of sustainability. Instead of putting their money where their mouth is, they pay lip service to the issue. We are one of the windiest places, if not the single windiest place, in Europe, so we should take the initiative and develop energy from our offshore wind — a significant resource that is the envy of many European countries.

We generate approximately 1% of our energy from renewable sources. Denmark, which is a country that is

not much bigger than ours, produces 25% of its energy from wind. We could do that if we had the will and if the Executive showed some leadership. We have the advantage of being an island around which there is much potential for wave and tidal power. We have a tidal-turbine prototype that should be developed, and I am sure that the Executive could help to promote that technology. The turbine could be developed at Harland and Wolff, and that technology could be a prototype for the rest of the world.

Mr McCarthy: The Member has repeatedly referred to the Executive. What Executive is he talking about? The one that should be in place has not met since June 2008. Will he clarify his position? Is he talking about the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, or is it some other executive? Perhaps the Member will explain.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Member for that point. I was talking about previous decisions that were made when the Executive were meeting.

If the resources that I referred to were developed, thousands of long-term jobs could be created. That could also combat fuel poverty by saving people money on energy bills. In addition, that would increase our energy security, because we are at the end of a long supply line for gas and oil, and we are being hit hardest by increasing fuel prices and shortages.

We are supposed to show that we really believe that climate change is a problem, but the appointment of our new Environment Minister has sent out all the wrong signals to the community. If the Environment Minister does not believe that we are responsible for climate change, why should anyone else?

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the Minister's understanding of climate change is on a par with Ali G's understanding of policing in Northern Ireland?

Mr B Wilson: I am not sure what Ali G's understanding of policing is, but it sounds good anyway.

Perhaps the Minister should get out more; he should attend a meeting of EU environment Ministers, which would give him an opportunity to convince those Ministers that they have all been conned by the green, climate-alarmist scaremongering that he mentioned in his 'News Letter' article. Other European environment Ministers would be interested to hear how he worked that out.

Most people who are involved in environmental matters consider the Minister's opinions to be backward, reactionary and irrelevant. He ignores all the scientific evidence, and he gives credibility to a few crank scientists who are sponsored by oil companies, hold extreme views and have a vested interest in promoting the use of fossil fuels.

The Assembly should support amendment No 2 and put sustainability at the centre of Executive policy.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank my colleague Mr Gallagher for proposing this motion.

The Committee recognises the threat from climate change and is aware of the urgency of the problem. Although the planet's climate has fluctuated naturally many times, the rate of change and the fact that human activity has been implicated as a source of warming make climate change one of the biggest problems to face the world this century. In an attempt to halt or minimise the potential effects of climate change, Governments worldwide are actively pursuing policies that aim to reduce carbon emissions, and the Environment Committee believes that Northern Ireland must also play its part.

The Committee supports the Department of the Environment's signing up to the UK's Climate Change Bill, which will put into statute the UK's targets to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through domestic and international action by at least 60% by 2050 and at least 26% by 2020, compared to the 1990 baseline. In addition, the Committee supports the Bill's five-year carbon budgets, which will set binding limits on carbon dioxide emissions, ensuring that every year's emissions count. However, Northern Ireland has a long way to go if it is to contribute effectively to those targets and move to a low-carbon economy.

The North's carbon dioxide emissions have fluctuated from the 1990 base year; however, by 2004, they had increased by 0.6%. Although that may not seem to be much, it is 3.6% above the level that would be required if we were to be on target to contribute our fair share of the 60% reduction target by 2050. During the same period, England and Scotland reduced their emissions by 6.7% and 14.1% respectively.

The Committee for the Environment supports the establishment of a new statutory body — the committee on climate change — to provide independent, expert advice and guidance to Government. The Committee for the Environment wants the new committee to provide independent advice about how Northern Ireland could achieve its targets, stay inside carbon budgets and implement emission-reducing policies.

The Climate Change Bill contains enabling powers to introduce new trading schemes through secondary legislation, which, while retaining the requirement for thorough analysis, consultation and the scrutiny of proposals before any new schemes are introduced, increases the policy options that Government might use to stay within budgets and to meet emission targets. The Committee can envisage the use of

climate-change mitigation measures in the North, and it welcomes the inclusion of those secondary-legislation provisions.

Furthermore, the Committee for the Environment welcomes the key Programme for Government goal to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint by at least 25% by 2025, and it stresses the need for that programme to be sufficiently resourced in order to achieve its goals. In addition, the Committee would have preferred a higher profile for climate change in the Programme for Government, which is a matter that has already been mentioned. In particular, the Committee urges the Government to highlight the implications of climate change for society and to make an explicit commitment to tackling it.

3.15 pm

In summary, the Committee for the Environment has endorsed the need for scientific evidence and the establishment of challenging targets for carbon reduction in its acceptance of the UK Climate Change Bill [HL]. The Committee welcomed the Department of the Environment's commitment to reducing the North's carbon footprint in the Programme for Government, but was disappointed by what can only be described as a lacklustre commitment by the Department to tackling the issue of climate change and its impacts on society.

As a constituency MLA and a party colleague of Mr Gallagher's, I fully support the motion and commend it to the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak in favour of the motion, and I thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone for tabling it. Sinn Féin supports the second amendment but certainly not the first.

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Wilson, has made that ministry the laughing stock of Europe, if not the world. Most people who have a detailed knowledge of the issue of climate change will agree that the Minister's attitude is a joke. However, it should not be treated as such because, in years to come, its consequences will prove to be costly.

Other Governments are getting to grips with climate change and showing leadership on the issue, and several Members gave examples of that. Looking across the water to Scotland, its Government are showing great leadership and making huge strides in relation to renewable energy. They have also ruled out the nuclear option for the provision of energy in that area. We all know that our Environment Minister supports that option, which is something that could have potentially fatal consequences if it were ever brought to these shores.

The Swedish Government have announced their intention to make Sweden the first country to break its dependence on oil and other fossil fuels by 2020. We

need to see that kind of leadership here because we cannot continue to be dependent on fossil fuels. The recent upsurge in the price of oil and other commodities such as electricity and gas demonstrates the need to find alternative sources of energy. As Brian Wilson mentioned, those alternatives are on our doorstep — wave and wind energy have great potential here in Ireland, as they do in Scotland. Indeed, we are the envy of many other countries in Europe in that regard.

Mr Wells: I am sorry to interrupt the Member as he polishes his environmental halo, but does it not strike him as being hypocritical that he is trying to lecture us about our environmental credentials while both his party and the SDLP have supported a massive amount of development in the countryside, which will, inevitably, lead to a vast increase in carbon emissions? Those parties support the environment only when it suits them, but when their constituents want to pepper the countryside with new developments, they are 100% behind it.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention; however, I will not take any lectures from Members of the DUP about environmental policy because the contradictions in that party are quite clear.

Ireland has great potential to develop renewable energy but that needs leadership, which, to date, has been lacking. Sinn Féin supports amendment No 2, tabled by the Green Party and the Alliance Party, because it is important that all Ministers recognise that human behaviour is contributing to climate change — it is not only the responsibility of OFMDFM and DOE. However, it is very difficult for other Ministers to reduce their Department's carbon footprint when the Environment Minister does not even accept that CO₂ emissions cause climate change.

It is quite clear from reading amendment No 1 that it proposes to do nothing with regard to climate change.

Mr Ross: The main focus of that amendment relates to conserving energy in the household. The Member will know that the energy consumed in our homes is responsible for 25% of all CO₂ emissions in the UK. Therefore, does the Member not recognise that the amendment encourages people to save energy, which will have an environmentally friendly impact?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have one extra minute to speak.

Mr McKay: I refer the Member to the text of that amendment, which states that the Assembly recognises:

“that mankind should contribute to a solution to the extent to which it is contributing to the problem”.

By the definition of the Minister and his party, mankind and womankind are not contributing to the problem — therefore, they need not contribute to the

solution. That is the clear implication of the DUP amendment.

The Minister needs to catch himself on. Climate change is a major issue for every Government in Europe and across the world — except for the Administration here. That is an embarrassment for the Assembly, and much more must be done.

The Member for East Antrim Alastair Ross referred to being environmentally friendly as very costly, and he is right. However, that is also the case in respect of the Health Service or other public services. The public is supportive of the need to invest money in order to encourage alternatives to commodities such as oil. That will help to combat climate change, and contribute to the economy. As Brian Wilson has said, a renewable-energy economy must be encouraged to create jobs in Ireland, as has been the case across Europe. That good practice must be examined and replicated.

If something is not done about global warming, there will be more flooding in East Antrim. Indeed, some have blamed climate change on the recent jellyfish invasion in the Minister's own constituency, and the people of East Antrim should take cognisance of that.

I support the motion and amendment No 2. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion. Amendment No 1, tabled by Mr Ross and Mr Weir, uses a rather Jesuitical set of words, stating that mankind:

“should contribute to a solution to the extent to which it is contributing to the problem”.

Is that a large extent or none? Given the Minister's denial of man's impact on climate change, which appears to be supported by his colleagues, that amendment may mean doing nothing. Therefore, I cannot support that amendment. However, I am content with amendment No 2, tabled by Mr Ford and Mr Wilson.

“We debate the motion because it is now accepted that climate change is the greatest environmental challenge faced by the world today.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p55, col 1*].

Those are not my words, but the words of the former Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, when introducing a motion in the Assembly some 10 months ago. That motion was unanimously accepted by the Assembly and it endorsed the extension of the provisions of the Westminster Climate Change Bill to Northern Ireland. Furthermore, a specific target was inserted into the Programme for Government document for:

“Reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25%, below 1990 levels by 2025.”

Page 14 of that document goes on to state:

“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.”

The final words of that statement clearly acknowledge man's contribution to climate change, and support the view expressed in the section of the DOE website that is devoted to climate change. Therefore, the policy of the DOE and the Executive is clear, and it is a policy that fits with the policies of the UK Government, the EU and other devolved UK legislatures.

However, in June this year, there was a revolution — the Paisley-purge in the DUP and the elevation of Mr Sammy Wilson to the post of Minister of the Environment. The Minister has form on the issue of climate change. In May 2005, he signed an early-day motion — number 178 — in the House of Commons. That motion stated:

“That this House agrees with the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser that climate change is a threat to civilisation; welcomes the cross-party agreement in favour of major cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, and particularly in carbon dioxide emissions, by 2050”.

The motion went on to call for:

“annual cuts in carbon dioxide emissions of 3 per cent.”

Those targets were intended to be written into a Climate Change Bill.

The Minister seems to have become a little confused this year. He signed another early-day motion — number 893 — tabled in February 2008 that also supported action against climate change, and which welcomed:

“new EU targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2 per cent. by 2020”.

The Minister went to great lengths to withdraw his signature from that early-day motion, on 26 June — after his ministerial appointment. Why did he perform another U-turn on that issue?

We know what the Minister of the Environment thinks about climate change from his various media performances, such as an opinion piece that he did for the ‘News Letter’ on 4 September. In short, he said that climate change is happening but that it is part of a natural cycle. He said that increasing CO₂ production from human sources is not a major factor and that we in Northern Ireland cannot do anything about it anyway.

In moving amendment No 1, Mr Ross acknowledged man's contribution to carbon dioxide production and its effect on climate change. Not only is the Minister's view out of sync with world scientific opinion and the views of the Executive and his Department, he is contradicting his party's election manifesto of last year, which states:

“The DUP has supported the introduction of a Climate Change Bill at Westminster and called for year on year targets in order to achieve reduced Carbon emissions. Northern Ireland must play its part in that overall effort, and a new Executive should be proactive in this area.”

The DUP also said that Ministers would no longer be able to act alone in narrow party interests. The Minister of the Environment appears to be on a solo run with regard to his attitude to climate change, and it seems as if he is ignoring his own election manifesto. Or has his party done a U-turn? Oops, has another DUP manifesto pledge been broken?

During Question Time on 29 September — a mere two weeks ago — the Minister stated:

“Indeed, 44% of climate scientists disagree with the statement that climate change is mostly the result of man-made causes.”
—[*Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p214, col 1*].

Will the Minister inform the House where he got that significant figure and will he back it up?

Mrs I Robinson: If hot air emissions were anything to go by, the Chamber would take off and float down Prince of Wales Drive. I am surprised; I thought that those Members who had a leaning towards the green lobby would have mentioned the number of lights that illuminate this Building at night and query whether low-energy light bulbs were being used. I thought that they would ask what we are doing to conserve energy in the Building. This place is like Blackpool illuminations every night and into the early hours of the morning.

Sammy Wilson is a good Minister. He brings objectivity and a breath of fresh air to his portfolio because he dares to question scientific viewpoints. Considering the damage that scientists' input has caused to our fishing fleets, one must question from where the scientists are coming.

Sinn Féin Members talked about damage being done to the environment. I can think of no body that did more to damage the environment with firebombs, petrol bombs and with the blitzing of the towns, countryside and villages of the Province over forty years than Sinn Féin/IRA. I do not take lectures from that side of the House either.

I support rational and reasonable debate on climate change, the part that civilisation contributes and on what our responses should be. Unfortunately, the mass hysteria of those supporting the “humans are responsible” argument has made it difficult for any degree of objectivity to prevail. I am as concerned as anyone about the change in climate and the possible repercussions on humanity; however, I am not prepared to buy blindly into the hysteria that has been generated by some sections of the green lobby. Its supporters demand that we listen to scientific consensus on the matter, but, at the same time, ignore those who disagree with their narrow view, thus ignoring the lack of scientific consensus on the causes of climate change.

The only certainty is that the facts are inconclusive. That is a serious matter.

3.30 pm

Mr McKay: Does the Member recognise that, aside from green lobby groups and green non-governmental organisations, many charities and anti-poverty groups recognise the effects of climate change, and that they also attribute it to the behaviour of mankind?

Mrs I Robinson: I have not heard any comments from that sector, but I take the Member's word for it. I thank him for raising the matter. It is on record, so I am sure that he is happy.

There is no doubt that climate change is a serious matter. Those who peddle doom and gloom have succeeded in swaying the Governments of countries around the world and have seriously undermined our ability to establish the true extent to which humans contribute to climate change. There seems to be a three-pronged tactic to undermine those who do not buy in to the AGW theory — the theory of anthropogenic global warming. The first tactic is to accuse sceptics of being dishonest, and to suggest that they are funded by big business and that they produce bad research to suit the needs of private business. What is conveniently omitted is the fact that pro-global-warming scientists have also received huge funding from business and, more notably, from Governments. The second tactic is to accuse sceptics of being akin to Holocaust deniers — that they and their theories are crazy, just like those who deny the Holocaust. The third tactic is to state that the majority of scientists subscribes to the global-warming theory and take that as proof of its reality. The fact is that there are reputed scientists who do not subscribe to the AGW theory.

It has already been established that climate models that inform the views of those at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are nothing like as unflawed as it would have us believe, and that there is a considerable pattern of error on the IPCC's part. If Governments are to get the best advice, they need information and analysis, including that from genuinely open and disinterested sources. With the environmental risks laid out, drafting the correct policies demands proper political accountability and, therefore, a much wider range of opinion than the IPCC currently provides.

No one would be so ignorant as to suggest that humans are not contributing to climate change. However, to suggest that we are completely responsible is both inaccurate and irresponsible. Advances in science can help us to address the impact that we do have by improving technology and mitigating what impact we have through greater efficiency. That is happening already. During the past 15 years, power-station generators have become 62% more efficient, and cars have become more than 80% more efficient. We do not need a raft of legislation and

penalties that are based on knee-jerk reactions that do not deal with the issue of climate change and that simply penalise individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland. I support amendment No 1.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for tabling the motion.

As we all know, climate change is one of the major issues that we will have to face in the future — not only here in Ireland but in the rest of the world. It has the potential to be of even greater concern than the global credit crisis that engulfs us at present.

There is real concern in the Assembly, and among the general public, that we have a Minister of the Environment who does not take the matter seriously. The Minister may have his own thoughts on the issue, but it is unthinkable that he let his personal opinions cloud his judgement, when all the evidence suggests that real action is needed now to counteract the effects of climate change.

Mr Ross: Will the Member point out when the Minister or his party did not take climate change seriously or say that the impact of climate change needed to be addressed? I am not sure from where he gets his information.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for his intervention, but if the Member were to read press statements from the past 12 months, he might find out for himself.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No; you have had your chance.

The general opinion of the public and interested parties is that they have no confidence in the Minister to deal with the real issue of climate change. The Stern Report states that climate change will affect all countries and, if it goes unchecked, temperatures could rise by 4°C above pre-industrial levels.

We use statistics, notes and evidence during every debate. We have evidence from certain scientists on climate change, but one party is neglecting to use that evidence in this debate. Why is that happening with this particular issue?

If climate change goes unchecked, global food production will be affected and sea levels will rise. Some Members have mentioned flooding, and we have all seen its effects. To be honest, I do not fancy the thought of Members from Belfast being flooded and perhaps floating down to the border; so we might as well take the issue seriously.

The Minister needs to take the matter seriously. Is he prepared to disregard the vast majority of scientific evidence on the pretext that he does not agree with it? Early in the new year, local councils will be signing up to the climate change declaration, and they will be

seeking funding from Europe to improve the environmental sustainability of district councils and local communities. That action is to be commended.

The mixed messages from the Department, on the one hand, and the Minister, on the other, mean that we do not know who is in charge and what will be delivered. Mr Ross said earlier that people should take responsibility, and I agree with that. However, they also need leadership, and the Minister of the Environment should be providing that leadership. The Minister must make it clear that he is committed to tackling climate change — no ifs and buts or personal opinions. He must commit to meeting the targets and recognising the need for sustainability. Let each of us in the Chamber send a clear message that we are taking the issue seriously and that everyone else should do likewise.

In conclusion, I will quote from the Stern Report:

“The benefits of strong, early action on climate change outweigh the costs.”

I ask the Minister to take strong action, or we will all face the cost. The Minister has the responsibility to lead in the face of the challenges that climate change brings, and he must ensure that the public do their part to meet those challenges. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Shannon: Aa' suppoart tha amenment. Aa' hae mien o' tha furst tiem that aa' heert aboot globel warmen en that wus whun mi sinns' brought ther hamewark tae tha kitchen table aboot this. Up tae this stage aa' haud thought that things went in circles en loops, that tha wather cycle faced bi mi grandfather wud jist be tha same facin mi wanes — that it wus normal fer ther tae be rain in tha simmer. Hooiniver, efter lisning tae tha grouwin consarns aboot globel warmen en tha ozone layer aa' sterted tae gaein seeryous thought tae tha hamewark mi boys brought hame.

I support the amendment. I remember the first time that I heard about global warming; when my sons brought homework on that very issue to the kitchen table. Until then, I had figured that there were circles and loops; that the weather cycle that my father had faced was the same cycle that my children would face, and that it was normal to have rain in the summer. After having listened to the growing speculation about the ozone layer and the effects of global warming, I began to think that there was something to the homework that my boys had brought home some years ago.

I began to look at ways to cut my carbon footprint. I planted 2,500 to 3,000 trees on my home farm just to do my bit for the environment. That was a good action to take. I know that the Minister has done the same on land that he owns, and he might mention that later. In fact, he may have planted as many trees as I have. However, the fact remains that global warming and climate change cannot be entirely put down to human faults. We can do only so much. The only one who can

truly restore anything to perfection is the Lord God Himself. We have a duty of care, but we cannot repair that which is beyond us. It is my opinion that swallowing the entire blame for climate change places far too much responsibility on our shoulders.

I will mention a few quotations and reports, which will help to illustrate the arguments. A United Nations report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that was published earlier this year stated that humans are very likely to blame for global warming, and that there is virtually no doubt that it is linked to man's use of fossil fuels. However, other climate experts say that there is little scientific evidence to support that theory. In fact, they say that global warming could be caused by increased solar activity, such as a massive eruption. Ice core samples from Antarctica have been used as proof of how warming over the centuries has been accompanied by raised CO₂ levels. Ian Clark, an expert in paleoclimatology at the University of Ottawa, claims that warmer periods of the earth's history came around 18 years before rises in carbon dioxide levels. That is another opinion, which, again, is slightly different from others.

Philip Stott, the professor emeritus of biogeography at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, stated that:

“The system is too complex to say exactly what the effect of cutting back on CO₂ production would be”.

A spokesman for the Royal Society said:

“We are not saying carbon dioxide emissions are the only factor in climate change and it is very important that the debate keeps going. But, based on the situation at this moment, we have to do something about CO₂ emissions.”

That is another viewpoint that is at odds with some of what has been discussed today. I am not arguing that we should be absolved of our responsibility to care for our world. However, I have quoted those men of science to show that we can only do so much.

I encourage the Minister of the Environment to ensure that the targets set in the Programme for Government are met. With the credit crunch nipping hard at almost everyone's heels, we should err on the side of caution and examine the possibility of increasing reliance on renewable sources. That would have less of an adverse effect on the environment than the use of fossil fuels, and it would lessen the strain on our pockets. We must strike the correct balance. Indeed, I have urged the elderly members of my constituency to take advantage of programmes such as the warm homes scheme so that they can save money and keep warm this winter. The promotion of such schemes will enable everyone in the Province to play their part in helping the environment while saving money.

The DUP amendment will make the motion better suited to making a real change to the lives of people in

the Province, which is what we are elected to do. The amendment will also encourage people to be environmentally minded. Having read articles and watched documentaries, I believe that we must shoulder some of the blame for climate change. We can do our bit to make the world a cleaner place. I encourage the Minister of the Environment to urge people in Northern Ireland to make our part of the world a little cleaner and healthier.

Mr McCallister: I support the motion. By its very nature, science has periods of debate that lead to consensus based on overwhelming evidence. There was a time when people thought that smoking was good for you, but we would now consider anyone with that opinion to be deluded or even dangerous. The opinion of the overwhelming majority of scientists in the world — based on compiled scientific evidence — is that the debate on the causes of climate change is over. Only a small radical minority oppose that world scientific opinion. Unfortunately for Northern Ireland — indeed, for the United Kingdom — Sammy Wilson has joined the ranks of that radical group.

When the most influential countries in the world are attempting to reduce CO₂ production and adapting to living with the effects of climate change, we in Northern Ireland — unfortunately and typically — are languishing behind. When other economies are taking advantage of new opportunities presented by renewable energy, sustainable development and green consumption, we in Northern Ireland have to waste time trying to convince our Environment Minister that climate change is happening.

The situation has resulted in some of Northern Ireland's most-respected scientists lambasting the Minister. Sir Bernard Crossland, a professor at Queen's University, Belfast, said:

"Sammy Wilson is ill-informed on the reality of the situation, but I guess that he will not believe much of our present climate change is manmade until the water is lapping up his knees in East Belfast."

That reality is already happening, but the Minister's head is still buried in the sand. Professor Brian Whalley, also from Queen's University, said of the Minister:

"He should look at all the government-produced analysis, climatic and economic, before making such sweeping statements with no scientific validity."

However, it does not appear as though the Minister will change his position.

There are economic, security and moral reasons why we need to mitigate the causes of man-made climate change. People throughout the world — including those in Northern Ireland — are facing increased flooding and drought causing immediate risk to life and health. Concerns are also being raised about food security and water security. In today's global economy, it is extremely naive to think that what

happens in other parts of the world will not affect us. Therefore, it is imperative that we act with the UK Government and the international community to reduce our carbon emissions. We must also persuade developing economies to switch to more environmentally friendly methods of production and consumption.

3.45 pm

The motion is correct to draw the attention of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the commitments that are contained in the Programme for Government — commitments which were approved by the Assembly. The Minister of the Environment is bound to Westminster decisions by those commitments. He must accurately reflect and fully implement the commitments that have been made to reduce carbon emissions and meet the targets for renewable energy production.

For the past 25 years, the UK economy has been, in part, driven by financial services and has been significantly de-industrialised. In the light of the current economic crisis in the financial markets, one of the driving forces of the economy is, potentially, in some jeopardy for the foreseeable future. It must be recognised that Northern Ireland has the potential to use renewable energy and a sustainable economy to supplement and improve traditional economic activity. The Minister does not recognise those opportunities, and that is regrettable.

I support amendment No 2, which was tabled by the Alliance Party and the Green Party. It is a logical and sensible extension to the motion. I urge the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to rein in the Minister of the Environment, especially in the light of the forthcoming climate change Bill, which could be embarrassing and damaging for Northern Ireland and the DUP.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House. I share the concerns expressed by other Sinn Féin Members that the Minister of the Environment has expressed personal opinions that are sceptical about, and contrary to, the wealth of scientific evidence that has emerged in recent years, which shows that climate change in the form of global warming is happening as a result of human activity. The fact that the Minister holds such views is troubling; if he allows his views to influence his decisions, it is a much more serious matter.

Climate change is real, and if Governments throughout the world do not take urgent action to address the issue, the impact will be devastating. Human interference has made the single biggest contribution to climate change, and the Assembly has a duty to do all that it can to reduce the acceleration of global warming.

As was mentioned earlier, the Programme for Government recognised that responsibility and set clear and achievable targets to reduce carbon emission, to use more renewable energy sources and to increase areas of forest and woodland. All parties signed up to the Programme for Government and approved those aims, which should be considered to be the minimum requirement. Every Minister and every Member has a responsibility to research, identify and implement measures that reduce our impact on climate change.

We have a responsibility to encourage more efficient use of energy by using cleaner, greener, renewable sources of electricity, such as wind, wave, biomass and solar power. The use of public transport must be encouraged, along with car sharing, cycling and walking. In order to reduce dependence on landfill and to limit methane emissions, the message of reduce, reuse and recycle should be promoted. Such a global problem requires global solutions, and we must be part of them. We must identify and borrow solutions from other countries and invest in learning facilities that will, in time, identify our own solutions, which we can share with the rest of the world.

The targets that are set out in the Programme for Government are achievable, and Sinn Féin believes that they are only the beginning. The issue must be addressed on an all-island basis. Under the conditions of the North/South Ministerial Council, the two Environment Ministers do not have the remit to tackle climate change. That must be changed in the review. Climate change knows no borders, and Dáil Éireann, through its Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, has already conducted considerable research into renewable energy projects. We must link that the Assembly's work on renewable energy, such as that which has been done by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. It is not the responsibility of only one Minister; it is the responsibility of all Ministers.

Greenpeace said that switching to green energy technologies based on solar, wind, biomass and hydropower and increasing energy efficiency makes environmental and economic sense. A spokesperson said:

"The amount of money world governments have pooled now in the financial crisis is huge and we have no guarantee it isn't being wasted — it would take just a fraction to spearhead renewable energy technologies".

The Assembly need not look far for evidence of success in reducing carbon emissions. A biomass power station at Lockerbie in Scotland has not only reduced emissions but has provided more than 300 jobs for the local economy, and it can supply electricity to approximately 70,000 homes. What the Government must look for to create the conditions for such a biomass plant is reflected in the reasons that the operators sited that plant at Lockerbie. Their deciding factors included:

a predicted 66% increase in Scottish forestry timber output by 2017; a high level of support from the Scottish Government and from Scottish Enterprise; the designation and preparation of the site for forest industry clusters; excellent transport links; and the plant's close proximity to densely forested areas.

Those are issues that show that we must be prepared to change. We have a unique opportunity to do so. Sometimes, in facing the most difficult times such as the current global credit crunch, the entire world seeks change. Barack Obama is leading the way in relation to renewable technologies. The House must follow suit.

Mrs D Kelly: To be able to save money by cutting household bills in these uncertain and difficult economic times is an attractive option, and there should be incentives to do so. It is an added bonus if such measures contribute to a reduction in individual and collective carbon footprints. Our dependency on oil for energy puts us at the mercy of other nations. We must invest in other energy resources, particularly in renewable energy, as a means of becoming independent and of meeting our long-term energy needs.

The scientific consensus is that most global warming is a result of human activity that causes the release of greenhouse gases — in particular, carbon dioxide. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007 states:

"Global atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide have increased markedly as a result of human activities since 1750 and now far exceed pre-industrial values determined from ice cores spanning many thousands of years."

That may be a difficult scientific statistic for the Minister to accept, given that many in his party believe that the earth was created some 4,500 years ago.

Mr Wells: I will give the Member an equally difficult statistic. The proliferation of single dwellings in the Irish Republic creates several thousand tons of excess carbon every year; yet her party, which claims to be environmentally aware and green, supports the proliferation and continuation of that trend. How can the Member pretend to be environmentally aware and to support the reduction of carbon emissions, when her party and Sinn Féin support a policy that will lead to a huge increase in those emissions as a consequence of increased journeys in the countryside?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be allowed an extra minute to speak.

Mrs D Kelly: I will answer such a charge with pleasure. As a representative of a rural constituency, I can say that PPS 14 is at the heart of that issue. I honestly do not believe that farms and houses in the countryside are the cause of global climate change.

Perhaps the Member might look to the party that sits to his left in the Chamber — and I am sure that he is glad of its company — because he is on his own on that point. I understand that the DUP wants PPS 14 to be amended. We do not want to see a blanket ban on houses in the countryside. Neither is a *carte blanche* approach sought to planning in the countryside. Therefore, the Member must look to his own party, because that is an additional divergent view. The planning reform and the response to PPS 14 that were promised in April 2008 have yet to be brought to the House. Therefore, constituents continue to ask — practically daily — what is happening.

What about our constituents? What about our farming communities and our rural dwellers? Their needs must be expressed. The Member would do well to reflect on his party's policy in relation to PPS 14.

Other Members referred to the fact that climate change and the responsibility for sustainable development do not lie solely with the Minister of the Environment, because we have been failed miserably by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who were due to publish, by June 2008, a strategy for sustainable development. However, it has yet to be published. There is no guidance yet on the statutory responsibilities of local authorities in relation to sustainable development.

I am not privy to the papers that have been tabled at the Executive, so I do not know whether the strategy is another victim of the logjam caused by the DUP and Sinn Féin's failure to agree and to get an Executive up and running again. I do not know whether it is one of the 30 papers, to which the First Minister referred some weeks ago, that are sitting there ready to be discussed. However, climate change is taken seriously in Europe and across the globe, and, thankfully, many young people have a keen interest in the matter. After all, we are merely custodians of the environment, and we are here but for a short time.

Climate change has been recognised across the globe as one of the major challenges facing all Governments and people in the twenty-first century. The SDLP takes seriously its commitment to deal with climate change, and we appeal to the Minister of the Environment to take the matter seriously as well.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I welcome the debate. When I first became Minister of the Environment, I said that I hoped that there would be some debate on the whole issue of climate change, and I have succeeded in generating that. Indeed, it appears that the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Gallagher has become so concerned about it that he has almost developed a climate change fetish. I receive questions on climate change from the Member all the time. I do not know how many questions I have

had from him about the matter; however, if he is so concerned, he should at least have done some research before he tabled his motion. I will come to the scientific part in a minute, but, for now, let us consider the motion. The Member is concerned that:

“the Minister of the Environment continues to ignore the mounting evidence that climate change is a significant issue”.

That is not the case. In fact, I have written newspaper articles about climate change, and I have participated in radio interviews about the matter. I do not deny that climate change is taking place. In fact, I made the point that climate change is happening all the time and has happened throughout the history of the world. Therefore, we must recognise it.

The motion then went on to call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that I set challenging targets for carbon reductions. That is not the job of the Minister of the Environment. Indeed — leaving the science of climate change aside — had the Member known how the Assembly works, he would have realised that those targets are set in the Programme for Government; they are not set by me or by my Department. He went on to say that I should ensure that those issues are raised at North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Again, if he had done some research, he would have realised that they do not even have a mandate for those responsibilities. Therefore, if the Member cannot even get the motion right, I doubt very much whether he will ever get the science of it right.

The Member also proclaimed that there is overwhelming evidence of climate change, but time did not allow him to present any of it. If there was such overwhelming evidence, he could have included a couple of lines of it, but he did not. Such was the time constraint that he stopped speaking two minutes before his time was up. At least we would have had two minutes' worth of evidence if the Member could have produced it.

4.00 pm

The issue of evidence came up time and time again in the debate, but no one came up with any evidence to back up their claims. Yet they talk about me being a crank.

A Member: Perish the thought.

The Minister of the Environment: Perish the thought. Indeed, the Member for North Down Brian Wilson, when he talked about leadership, said that I was a crank and that all the people who did not believe that were sponsored by the oil companies. I wish that I was; but I am not sponsored by the oil companies.

Let us look at some of those cranks. Several people's opinions on climate change were quoted in 'The Independent on Sunday' this weekend. The

conservationist David Bellamy — much beloved by the Green Party, I am sure — said:

“Global warming is the biggest scam since the church sold indulgences back in the Middle Ages. If our Government actually believes that all those people are going to die, why did it build Terminal Five?”

David Bellamy hit the nail on the head. While people wax eloquent about climate change and the need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, does it make any difference when it comes to making decisions? I will give Brian Wilson the chance to answer me if I am wrong, but does he not live near one of the best railway lines between a satellite town and Belfast? There is a great bus service from Central Station to Stormont. Brian Wilson ranted and raved about building roads and showing leadership, so perhaps he will tell the House how he got here today. Did he come by sustainable transport or did he drive up in his gas-guzzling, carbon dioxide-emitting car?

Mr B Wilson: It certainly was not a gas-guzzling car. I commuted on the train to Belfast for more than 20 years.

The Minister of the Environment: He did not do that today.

Even Brian Wilson's environmentalist friends are deserting him. Patrick Moore, one of the founders of Greenpeace, has said that the evidence on climate change produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is nonsense. The leading economist Ruth Lea said exactly the same thing. She said that more economists speak out on this issue because they can speak more freely than scientists, many of whom find that if they speak out, they put their jobs in jeopardy.

Climate change is now a multi-million pound industry. Universities receive massive grants to pump out information about carbon dioxide and man-made climate change. Those who dare to dissent put themselves in jeopardy. There is almost a witch-hunt against some scientists. The climatologist Piers Corbyn, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, and the House of Lords Economics Committee have all voiced their concerns. I could go on, but I assure Members that I am not in the company of cranks.

A Member: There are one or two here.

The Minister of the Environment: Perhaps there are, and I will come to them in a moment. Nevertheless, my stand on this issue is not shared by an assembly of cranks; there are well-respected people in the fields of science, economics and politics with whom I share my view.

Mr Beggs challenged the figures that I produced. The last report on the scientific consensus on climate change by scientists who knew something about the

issue was produced by Joseph Bast and James M Taylor — not the 2,600 scientists who signed a letter on behalf of Al Gore.

It turned out that the letter had been signed by landscape architects, gynaecologists, hotel managers and practitioners of Chinese traditional medicine. The report on the consensus of climate scientists found that 45.8% of them disagreed with the statement that the scientific debate on climate change is over. I know that the Member is very keen on reading the early-day motions that I introduce in the House of Commons; if he wants to do a bit of reading there is some material that I would be quite happy for him to read tonight on the issue.

Many Members said that we do not give leadership. I have already shown that the honourable Member for North Down, who waxed so eloquent about leadership, has not actually practised a great deal of it. If one looks at other Members' constituencies, one will find the same. Mr Gallagher spoke about reducing CO₂ emissions, and Mr Wells hit the spot two or three times when he challenged both Sinn Féin and the SDLP on PPS 14. They denied that planning policies and housing dispersal had any impact on CO₂ emissions. Members ought to read the recent report on CO₂ emissions in local-government areas across the United Kingdom — I will make it available in the Library if they wish. The surprising thing is that the constituents of North Down do very well when it comes to CO₂ emissions, as do those of East Antrim. The highest concentrations of CO₂ emissions are in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as illustrated by the red areas of the map that I am holding. That is partly due to living patterns, traffic movements, agriculture and heavy industry.

I would like to challenge those Members who spoke about leadership. Will they go to their constituents in the areas that are marked red on the map — the areas with the highest levels of carbon concentration — and tell people that they must stop using their cars? I wonder whether those Members who spoke about leadership car-share on their way here. I doubt it very much. Will those Members tell their constituents that they will stop the dispersal of housing in the countryside? I doubt it very much. Will they tell constituents that they want fewer roads built for them to move around rural areas? I doubt it very much.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister not acknowledge that there have been 80 years of neglect west of the Bann, and the reason that Members are today asking for infrastructure west of the Bann is because there was none. There was no investment, no infrastructure, and nowhere for people to live. Many people are still living in unfit houses.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member misses the point. If settlements are dispersed, people

have to travel more, and if they travel more, they will emit more CO₂.

There are many different solutions to the problem. Many such solutions have landed on my desk, and I have no embarrassment in saying that I have rejected them. The latest proposal flagged up the fact — I am sure that Members who serve rural constituencies will love it — that it is not just fast cars that cause CO₂ emissions; it is flatulent cows as well, apparently.

At least the honourable Member for South Down Jim Wells is consistent on that. Twenty per cent of the CO₂ emissions in Northern Ireland comes from animals, and the suggestion is that we should all reduce our consumption of milk to one quarter of a pint per day. I could not even have my cornflakes in the morning. The proposal also suggests that we have four 4 oz portions of meat per week — a couple of sausages a day would do — and the rest of the time we would have to eat cabbage or whatever it is that Jim Wells eats. Think of the impact that that would have. That was one of the suggestions that I received to reduce CO₂ emissions. In the past couple of months I have received submissions from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on carbon-emissions trading, asking that we support the UK position.

The impact of buy-in carbon allowances would be a 25% increase in electricity prices. The impact of scrubbing the chimney stacks to reduce CO₂ emissions would be a further increase of 20%.

When the Member for North Antrim and the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Tommy Gallagher say in the Assembly that they are concerned about fuel poverty, are they really saying that I, as Minister of the Environment, should have given the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the United Kingdom my assent to negotiate two pieces of work that would have led to a 45% increase in electricity prices in Northern Ireland? Are those Members really saying that? Would they support such a motion had I proposed it? I dare say that would not have, and yet we get this cant.

Those Members do not want to stop people building houses in the countryside. They do not want to reduce farming. They do not want to stop using their cars and start using public transport — yet they want everybody else to do it. They do not want energy prices or taxes to rise. I think that it was the Chairman of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, who complained about the increase in road tax for cars that are more than seven years old in order to reduce CO₂ emissions. He complained that that increase would affect more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland. Carbon emissions cannot be reduced without pain. Almost every action is painful. Of course, Members say that CO₂ emissions can be reduced by insulating

homes and by saving energy. However, those measures would reduce carbon emissions by only around 5%.

Mrs D Kelly: Your own party said that.

The Minister of the Environment: Yes, but the point that I am making is that it would be a drop in the ocean in the fight to reduce CO₂ emissions. I am committed to policies that do not hit people in the pocket. Today, I have shown that, first, there is no scientific evidence or, as people have suggested, consensus on climate change. No Member has offered one piece of scientific evidence to support that.

Secondly, I have shown that the cost of reducing CO₂ emissions is enormous. Members talk about fuel poverty and the impact that that has on their constituents. However, climate change is not the most important issue that people face today. It is an issue, but it is not the most important issue. Let us get that into perspective.

Mr B Wilson: I am sorry, because I did not anticipate that I would have to wind on the debate.

The Minister certainly offered an interesting defence of an indefensible position. First, I did not refer to him as a crank. Rather, I was referring to the scientists who produced the argument against climate change. During the debate, recurring points were that humankind should take action to reduce climate change and that the climate change is solely man-made. Obviously, it is not the sole cause; many other factors exist.

One point that was raised several times was that those Members in whose name the motion stands believe that climate change is solely man-made. We do not believe that. It is a contributory factor, and, in most cases, it is a major contributory factor. Debate continues in society about the extent of man-made climate change. The debate is not whether man has caused climate change but to what extent he has done so. The debate about whether man has caused some climate change has already been won. Few scientists would disagree with that particular point.

Mr Ross referred to green taxes, which I fully support because they are the only way to change people's behaviour. The congestion charge was very unpopular when it was introduced in London by Ken Livingstone, but it has stopped traffic gridlock there. There is no way that Boris Johnson will repeal the charge, because it has made the atmosphere in London significantly better, and driving in the city is much easier because of the congestion charge — a green tax. The argument that green taxes are used to raise revenue is, in most cases, nonsense. We want to encourage people to do what is best for the environment; not raise taxes.

4.15 pm

The idea that we must choose between the environment and the economy was also mentioned.

That choice is not difficult — we must choose the environment, which will, in turn, help the economy. We must look at the new green economy, because our present economy, which has operated for many years, is unsustainable. Sustainability is the key issue, because we cannot continue as we are. We must look to new technology, because it holds potential, and the Executive should show leadership on that issue.

Reference was made to PPS 14 once again. It is an issue on which I have considerable sympathy with the views of Mr Wells. Instead of addressing environmental problems when it suits us, we must make hard choices and sacrifices.

Mr Wells: Is the honourable Member appalled, like me, by the hypocrisy of the Members of the two parties opposite who are only prepared to accept pain when it suits them? When accepting pain means a loss of votes from their core constituency, the environment takes second place for those Members. There is no chance of the two parties opposite taking difficult decisions that affect dispersed rural communities, because they know that that is where their core vote comes from.

Mr B Wilson: All Members have difficult choices and decisions to make, whether we are from rural or urban areas. The Minister is —

Mr Boylan: I remind Mr Wells that the previous Minister of the Environment said that developing a plan for the countryside was about striking a balance between protecting it and sustaining rural communities. How can Mr Wells disregard a sector of the rural community in the development of that policy? That is what is happening — a section of people who live in rural areas is being excluded. How would Mr Wells sustain rural communities if a section of people who live in rural areas is being disregarded?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Brian Wilson's time is up.

Mr Ross: I will briefly address some of the points that were made in the debate. In proposing amendment No 2, Mr Brian Wilson focused on the Minister rather than the issue, which was disappointing. He mentioned public transport, which is a very important issue. The best way to get people to use public transport is to make it more attractive and efficient — I am sure that all Members agree on that. He also mentioned planning and will, therefore, support the fact that the Minister has already taken action on that issue.

When proposing amendment No 1, I said that we must ensure that we do not build on flood plains and that a certain amount of flood water should be kept on the site of all new developments. Those are practical steps that have already been taken.

He spoke of the importance of individuals conserving energy. However, the amendment calls on

the Minister to do just that; therefore the Member should be able to support it. He promoted — or seemed to promote — the idea of a congestion charge. I am not sure that he would find support from his constituents for introducing a congestion charge in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, recognised the seriousness of the issue, as has the DUP and the Minister of the Environment. He outlined some of the legal obligations to which the Department and the Executive are subject.

The Member for North Antrim Daithí McKay spoke about nuclear power, which is now supported by the co-founder of Greenpeace. He did not care to answer my colleague Mr Wells, whose green credentials cannot be questioned. He did not read the amendment properly, because he accused my party of not taking climate change seriously, which is simply not a fact.

He agreed with my original assertion that many environmental policies are costly to individuals. That is precisely why our amendment calls for a way for individuals to be able not only to save energy but also to save money, because that is a message that can be supported by the community and one that will have an impact. It will save energy and money, and that is how environmental issues should be promoted.

Mr McKay: Has the Member spotted the contradictions coming from his side of the House about the main causes of climate change, and does he agree that it is the actions of people that mainly contribute to climate change?

Mr Ross: Various reasons were given for climate change. What we know as fact is that climate change is happening and that it must be addressed, which is what we are urging.

I do not know whether my East Antrim colleague Roy Beggs was speaking for the Ulster Unionist Party, the Conservative Party, the PUP, the Traditional Unionist Voice or whoever his party is now linked to. *[Laughter.]* We are getting used to his party-political sniping, and today was no different. He talked about large ideas but little about local solutions. I am not sure where in the amendment he saw that there was no mention of manmade contribution to climate change. Perhaps he should have taken the time to read it.

My colleague Iris Robinson pointed out simple, cost-effective ways of conserving energy; hers was a balanced, rational approach. She spoke about the seriousness of the issue — a view with which no one on this side of the House disagrees. She said that she is against green taxes, as they simply hurt those who cannot afford to pay them, which is particularly important in the current global economic situation.

Mr Easton: Is my colleague aware that at North Down Borough Council, only last week, the Member from the Green Party, Brian Wilson, and his colleague from the Alliance Party, Stephen Farry, voted to cut down trees in north Down? Surely, there are double standards from the Alliance and Green parties?

Mr Ross: That is interesting. Given the fact that planting trees can help the environment, that seems to be hypocritical indeed.

Cathal Boylan also got it wrong and did not listen to the amendment; he said that the DUP did not take the matter seriously, and that is not correct. However, I support one thing that he said when he recognised that there is a border, and that is progress for Sinn Féin. He said that the Minister was not providing leadership. However, the amendment calls on the Minister to show leadership and actively to support certain agencies that are helping environmental issues.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way because I do not, I believe, get any extra time. My colleague Jim Shannon spoke of things that individuals could do, which is what we are calling for. Individuals can do simple things around their home to save energy, money and the environment. He said that humans contribute a certain amount to climate change; and the amendment states that humans should make amends for any such contribution.

John McCallister spoke about world scientists, or a section of them anyway. He said that we have to convince the Environment Minister that climate change is happening. Speaking where he did in the debate, it would have been clear to him that we know how serious the issue is and that the Environment Minister has never denied that climate change is happening.

He then asked what practical steps had been taken to reduce flooding. The Minister has taken practical steps, which I have already explained. Mr Willie Clarke discussed global problems and called for an all-Ireland solution. I am not quite sure how an all-Ireland solution would deal with global issues. I am somewhat bemused by that.

Dolores Kelly started off her comments well, discussing saving energy and money, which is my party's message. However, she went on to make a point about the farming community. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change would, of course, ruin the farming industry in Northern Ireland. I support the amendment and hope that the House will do the same.

Mr Dallat: I suppose that I should start my comments by congratulating the Minister on his research, which all seemed to come from 'The Independent'. Of course, I would be the last person to accuse the Minister of relying on research from one

source. Indeed, I am convinced that he has just graduated from the Bart Simpson school of environmental science.

The debate simply confirms what Members have known from the beginning; that the Minister is not serious about climate change. Indeed, he was quoted in the 'News Letter' of 5 September:

"there is no scientific consensus around the causes."

He argues that there is no conclusive evidence that greenhouse gases are a major cause of climate change. Thanks, Sammy, for confirming that for us. Of course, everyone enjoys the good weather — lambs skipping through the fields, birds singing, and so on. However, that is not the reality in many parts of the world at present. The Minister knows the reasons for that.

Tommy Gallagher opened the debate on a serious note. Alastair Ross said that cross-border bodies have no mandates. Of course, we no longer live in the wonderful era of the blue skies of Ulster and grey skies of the Republic. The matter is now a global problem. I must congratulate Jim Wells, who, in fact, was not listed by the DUP to speak in the debate. He did extremely well. As he is a planning consultant in south Down, I believe that he deserves to be heard. At one stage, I was pleased that he was joined by another Member. That increased his mandate by 100% — if my mathematics is correct — which is good.

Brian Wilson pointed out that too much money is spent on roads. I wish that he would visit Dungiven. Of course, he went on to admit that he did not come to the Assembly by public transport. I am sure that that applies to most of us. I wonder whether Sammy shared the ministerial car with Nigel this afternoon. I suspect not. Sometimes, it is not a good idea to probe such matters too deeply.

Brian Wilson made the point that if the Assembly deals seriously with climate change, we could increase employment. He illustrated that point with figures from Germany. Patsy McGlone spoke on behalf of the Environment Committee. I understand his views, which were a constructive contribution to the debate. The misrepresentation about houses in rural areas that occurred afterwards —

Mr Gallagher: During his misrepresentation about rural housing and energy usage, as with all of his other threadbare arguments, the Minister treated the House to much gesticulation and jumping up and down when he held up a map that compares energy consumption in the east with that of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which is my constituency. He said that my area was the worst abuser as regards carbon emissions and suchlike. In fact, he was comparing houses in the city of Belfast, where there is street lighting, with scattered housing in a rural area where there are long lanes; where children come home on dark evenings and parents must put lights on in their farmhouses; and where farmers work

outside until, perhaps, 11.00 pm and, therefore, must keep lights on. The Minister has no argument at all.

Mr Dallat: That was a fairly lengthy intervention.

Iris Robinson told the House that she did not buy into the hysteria over climate change. God knows, Members were relieved to hear that. *[Laughter.]* Perhaps we should all go home and contact our psychiatrists, or it could be another abomination.

4.30 pm

Cathal Boylan described the whole crisis as being more serious than the credit crunch; he may know more about those banks than the rest of us.

Jim Shannon said that he was not convinced about climate change but, to be fair, he encouraged the Minister to take the whole thing seriously and to try to achieve the targets, which was honourable.

John McCallister made his usual contribution; however, he managed to get the politics into it.

Dolores Kelly reminded me that Nigel Dodds lives in Banbridge but is a councillor in Belfast, and Ian Paisley Jnr lives in the Lagan Valley but represents North Antrim. With respect to travel to work, we could all make vast improvements to the levels of carbon emissions.

The Minister of the Environment then confirmed our worst fears: nothing will change.

However, all in all, the debate has been extremely interesting and constructive. At the end of the day, Minister Sammy Wilson has got the message. The nonsense that has been churned out on the environment is extremely worrying and that is very sad. Those Members who have travelled to other parts of the world are aware of the consequences of climate change in Africa, South America and other areas. Those who are dying in their thousands are dying because —

The Minister of the Environment: Education.

Mr Dallat: Sammy Wilson knows that I spent 30 years in education, the same as him. I made my contribution, and I hope that he has listened carefully today to what has been said to him.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if the amendment is made the Question will not be put on amendment No 2 and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 58.

AYES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, 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 Ayes: Mr Ross and Mr Shannon.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Gallagher and Mrs D Kelly.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern that the Minister of the Environment continues to ignore the mounting evidence that climate change is a significant issue, and —

(i) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the Department of the Environment recognises recent scientific evidence and sets challenging targets for carbon reductions and sustainable development across all departments; and

(ii) calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that the principles and priorities for the Department of the Environment contained in the Programme for Government, and approved by the Assembly, are reflected accurately by both the Minister of the Environment and departmental officials, for example, when attending North-South and East-West ministerial meetings; and

(iii) calls on all Ministers to ensure that their Departments recognise the significance of man-made climate change, particularly in the promotion of sustainability in transport, planning, housing and energy consumption.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Omagh Bombing

Mr Deputy Speaker: I caution Members that civil matters relating to the bombing are before the courts and that a judgement has not yet been made. Therefore, those matters are sub judice and, in accordance with Standing Order 73(2), should not be mentioned during the debate. Furthermore, I remind Members of their general duty to behave responsibly in order to ensure that their comments do not prejudice any future court proceedings.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. Amendment No 2 has been tabled by the proposer of the motion, who will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a joint winding-up speech on the motion and the amendment. The proposer of amendment No 1 will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Members should be aware that an extra 15 minutes will not be allocated for the debate because the motion and amendment No 2 will be moved and wound simultaneously.

Mr Ford: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the establishment of a formal, cross-border, legally binding process, designed to secure full disclosure from the Intelligence Services and Security forces in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, to establish what relevant information they had before, and immediately after, the attack which killed 29 civilians on 15 August 1998.

I also beg to move amendment No 2: Insert after “civilians”

“, and two unborn children,”

This is, possibly, the most important motion that the Assembly has debated since March 2007. It is, certainly, the most important piece of private Members' business that has reached the Chamber.

The events in Omagh on 15 August 1998 were horrific, and every Member will be aware of the facts surrounding them. Those of us who have family connections in the Omagh area have particularly strong feelings on the matter. Although I did not experience that afternoon's events as directly as my colleague Dr Kieran Deeny, my family roots are in Omagh and, a generation earlier, I might have been walking up Market Street

with my family. Therefore, I understand the feelings of the community in Omagh and the Omagh district.

We must recognise the suffering that the bomb caused to the bereaved; to the injured; to those who were involved in the rescue efforts, the nursing and other aspects of hospital care; and to those in the Omagh community who were traumatised by the bomb. We must make clear our utter condemnation of those terrorists — in every sense of the term — who perpetrated the bombing. I mean those who made it, those who planted it and those who detonated it. They are solely responsible for the crime. Those points are clear and do not need to be reiterated at length.

The purpose of the motion is to consider what the organisations that were, and are, responsible for security on both sides of the border now need to do. It is not just about the past and about Omagh but about learning lessons so that future generations are protected. In recognising that the victims of the Omagh bombing came from all sections of the community and from three nations, it is important that the Assembly unite in support of the families and all those who suffered, and, therefore, in support of the motion.

Too often in the past, victims came from one section of the community and were supported by public representatives from that section of the community alone. In the case of Omagh — a town with good community relations, and where people from every section of the community suffered together — it is important that we, as representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, come together today.

Over the years, there has been a slow, steady trickle of information from various journalists who engaged in background research. That trickle culminated in the revelations of the BBC's September 'Panorama'. In contrast to those alleged and apparently accurate suggestions, the security services — potentially North and South — have failed to disclose the information that they had that might have either led to the prevention of the bombing or to speedy moves to arrest the perpetrators. Those possibilities must be considered.

We may well discount the allegations that were made by the alleged informer Kevin Fulton, who accused the RUC of having prior knowledge of the bomb and of taking no action. Those allegations were subject to full investigation by the previous Police Ombudsman. However, serious journalists have made credible allegations that certain security agencies held intelligence that was not passed on to the detectives who investigated the bombing. Whether or not that could have occurred before the bombing, it certainly appears that there are strong reasons to believe that information that could have been passed on within hours of the bombing was not passed on for days, or even weeks or months — particularly the specific information

that was highlighted on 'Panorama' that related to the use of mobile phones on both sides of the border.

There is, therefore, a shadow over Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and the other security services. Nobody knows who knew what and who withheld what information. It certainly seems that security services tend to work to protect their informers, methods, technology and general sources. However, if they got it wrong, there is absolutely no excuse for their having failed to pass on the information subsequently, and as early as possible.

If there is any truth in the suggestion that GCHQ had information that was not passed on within hours after the bombing, who knows what might have been discovered if the RUC or Garda Síochána had had the opportunity to raid appropriate places within hours of the bombing? Who knows what prospect there might have been of turning up a weak link in the gang, or what forensic scientists might have determined if they had had access to appropriate samples at an early stage? If any of the intelligence services failed to take action that they could have taken in the wake of such mass murder, they have serious questions to answer.

The failure to get answers to those questions so far calls into question the promises of the then Chief Constable, Prime Minister and Taoiseach about leaving no stone unturned.

Those promises have subsequently been repeated by others in Government, including the Secretary of State. For example, when the leader of the SDLP asked questions in Westminster, he received no significant answer from the previous Secretary of State.

5.00 pm

We understand that the Prime Minister has called for a review by the Intelligence Services Commissioner of the information that was available, but that is simply not good enough. The Prime Minister's record on dealing with the security services is not one of openness and transparency, and it does not inspire confidence. I doubt whether anyone in Northern Ireland — and certainly no one in Omagh — would believe the Prime Minister if, in the next two or three months, he were to rise to his feet in the House of Commons and announce that, following an investigation, there were no causes of concern. There must be a much wider investigation.

Moreover, there are concerns about the relationship between the security services in both jurisdictions. Investigative work by journalists suggests that co-operation was distinctly less than that which was promised. Indeed, what should have been a joint investigation by the police and the gardaí appears to have been two parallel investigations. The point about parallel lines is that they never meet. It is questionable

whether information sharing occurred, and that is a further matter for concern.

It is understandable that the families are calling for a full public inquiry, and I share the families' and the Omagh Support Group's concerns. However, although the motion does not rule out a public inquiry, it does not call for a commitment to one. Much of the required information — which is held by the security services — is unlikely to come out directly to a public inquiry and, therefore, that may not be the right route to take. The motion is broadly based and non specific; it calls for:

“a formal, cross-border, legally binding process.”

Such a process will probably require legislation in Westminster and the Oireachtas. That will require an innovative solution because it cannot be conducted solely in a single jurisdiction. The Assembly must not be prescriptive about how that might be achieved; rather, it must set out the required principles and make the moral case for action by the two Governments, and I trust that we can all agree on that.

I turn to amendment No 1. I hope that it is clear to DUP Members where the supporters of the motion stand concerning violence in general, and their condemnation of this crime in particular. The motion focuses on the Omagh people's legitimate demands for closure, through the disclosure of the information held by the security forces, including information about actions that were not taken. The focus of the motion is not on the perpetrators.

In addition, rather than shifting the focus back to the terrorists, it is important to send a clear message to the security services on both sides of the border about what future generations can expect. Furthermore, I regret the fact that the DUP amendment appears to be prescriptive. For example, it suggests that two parallel inquiries could follow up on problems that we witnessed previously.

At the beginning of the debate, I said that my family roots are in Omagh district. Ironically, my mother's home was a couple of hundred yards from Tom Buchanan's mother's home. Therefore, I feel that I know as much as anyone who was not directly involved about how things were and how people feel about the matter. I trust that Mr Buchanan can therefore accept the bona fides with which the Alliance Party proposed the motion and that he will recognise that, although there are good points in his amendment, it does not meet the current requirements. The best message that could come from this House would be a united and unanimous call in support of the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“condemns the republican terrorists responsible for the murder of the 29 people and two unborn children in Omagh on 15 August 1998; recognises that they alone were responsible for this tragedy;

notes the recent revelations about the possible breakdown in the provision of information that may have assisted in the prevention of the bombing; and calls on the UK Government to urgently institute a process to investigate the matter (i) in a way which is open, transparent, and commands the confidence of the community; and (ii) in co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Ireland."

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the car-bomb explosion on Market Street in Omagh on the afternoon of Saturday 15 August 1998 was the single worst atrocity ever witnessed in Northern Ireland, claiming the lives of 29 people and two unborn babies. The horrific aftermath of the bomb, which revealed the true extent of death, injury, devastation and destruction, not only plunged the people of Omagh into a state of shock and disbelief, but stunned the entire nation.

For many people in Omagh, that was a day that they will never forget; a day when families were torn apart and the entire heart of Omagh was ripped out by a bloodthirsty republican mob calling itself the Real IRA. From the Floor of the House, I reiterate my condemnation of those who orchestrated, planned and planted the bomb in Omagh, as well as my full support for the families of the victims in their search for justice.

I still remember the scenes of sorrow, and the tears and heartbreak of children and parents as the lives of their loved ones were so brutally taken away, all because they were law-abiding citizens. Those are memories that I will never forget, and I again tender my sympathy to all those families. Although 10 years have passed, I know that the heartbreak and sorrow still remain, and I commend those families for their courage, strength and determination as they have sought to pick up the broken pieces and continue in their fight for justice, so that those who were responsible for that heinous crime are brought before the courts.

I have no doubt that, on many occasions, just as those families thought that they were reaching closure, they were disappointed simply because all the i's were not dotted and the t's were not crossed, resulting in the case falling foul of the judicial system. Today, we should pause for a moment and reflect on why, after all the effort by the families and the security forces, no one has been charged for that atrocity to date. Is it not because there are still those in the republican/nationalist community who, to this day, have failed to come to the security forces with relevant information that would have nailed the perpetrators?

Over the years, while the focus of blame has been put on the security forces and the intelligence services for failings on their part as they sought to put together a case and gather evidence to bring the perpetrators to justice, those republican terrorists have been let off the hook. If we want to see justice done and closure reached for the families in Omagh, we must focus our attention on those who orchestrated, planned and carried out that atrocity.

I am in no doubt that the recent revelations from the BBC 'Panorama' programme, claiming that the Government's communications headquarters withheld information from the security forces that might have prevented that bomb, have generated a sense of disbelief as well as further frustration and anger among the families and the local community.

Those who withhold that information are as guilty of that atrocity as those who carried it out. A clear message must be sent from the House today; if anyone in the communities or in Government circles are withholding that information, they are as guilty as the people who carried out that terrible atrocity on the people in Omagh.

Although I commend the Prime Minister, Mr Brown, for his swiftness in ordering a review of the intercepted intelligence material connected to the Omagh bomb, I call on him again to have that material released with the utmost urgency. I also call on the First and deputy First Ministers to do all in their power to compel Mr Brown to have that material released.

I have tabled the amendment because I feel that the original motion is flawed and weak in its content, and would bring neither justice nor closure for the families of Omagh. It fails to condemn those who carried out the atrocity, and it also fails to request the Government to act with urgency.

The motion is rather open-ended and fails to call for action to be taken in an open and transparent way; such action would command the support of the entire community.

Time and again in Northern Ireland, we have witnessed inquiry after inquiry. We have witnessed people pressing for inquiries, only to be let down, and when those inquiries have eventually taken place, they have taken a long time to complete. However, after completion, there have still been no results nor any answers for the families concerned.

Mr Jason McCue, the lawyer acting on behalf of the Omagh families, has urged the Assembly to press Gordon Brown to release the secret GCHQ surveillance transcripts. He has stated that that evidence is more important than any cross-border inquiry. He also stated:

"The best thing the assembly can do is to ask for that evidence ... The focus of the debate should be on that evidence being handed over ... The assembly should unite to press Gordon Brown on that."

Therefore, I humbly ask Members not to divide the House on this important and sensitive matter. Instead, I ask that Members support amendment No 1 and help to bring justice and closure to the Omagh families.

The Omagh families have gone through so much in the past 10 years that we do not want to see the process being prolonged any further. We want the withheld information to be brought to the fore so that the

perpetrators of this terrible atrocity can be brought to justice. Those responsible for killing, maiming and injuring so many in Omagh have left their victims with scars for the rest of their lives. They have engraved in their hearts something that they will never forget, will never get over and will have to learn to live with. I do not believe that we want to put those families through any further pain or stress.

The House would do well to unite behind amendment No 1, which calls for information to be urgently released. A broad, sweeping motion again lets the perpetrators off the hook, and this matter must be dealt with urgently. Therefore, I plead with the House to support amendment No 1, so that the people of Omagh can find closure to the terrible atrocity that occurred in 1998.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have no hesitation in supporting the motion and amendment No 2, which makes specific reference to Avril Grimes's unborn twins. The motion makes reference to a formal, cross-border, legally binding process, and I support that.

My first contribution to a debate in the Assembly's first mandate, a short time after the Omagh bomb in 1998, concerned this very subject. What happened then was a huge tragedy; it was wrong and was condemned by everyone. It caused a multiplicity of deaths and injuries, physical and emotional scars, and it had long-lasting effects on people throughout Ireland. Those effects were most particularly felt in County Tyrone and in the Omagh area. There were also major implications for people in Madrid.

Some of the people who died were known to me personally, and I know many of their relatives. That is why it was appropriate for David Ford to say that we should all recognise the suffering that was occasioned by the Omagh bomb in 1998.

I want to recognise the efforts of the medical staff at Tyrone County Hospital at that time. Those members of staff played a vital role in saving lives, healing wounds and dealing with many of the dead.

5.15 pm

I bear in mind the Deputy Speaker's comments reminding Members not to say anything during the debate that might prejudice criminal proceedings.

My colleague Pat Doherty, MP for West Tyrone will address the issues in detail. I want to say at the outset, however, that Sinn Féin supports the establishment of an independent international truth commission. We support families who organise and campaign for the truth. The thrust of the motion is about arriving at the truth as to what happened in Omagh in August 1998, and Sinn Féin supports the families who organise

themselves and who campaign for the truth in respect of the Omagh bomb.

There is concern about the British Government's and the Irish Government's commitment to a truth-recovery process that has been talked about here today. No one should seek to sweep the truth under the carpet. If society is to move forward, and if we are to leave conflict behind, we must address the tragic human consequences of the past. I therefore approach the motion in a supportive capacity.

Mr McNarry: As Members know, I organised an event in the Long Gallery on 1 April this year — over six months ago — at which many Omagh families told their stories to Members and at which they called for the tabling of a motion that would request a cross-border inquiry into the Omagh bomb. They have made no other requests. I must say that that evening in the Long Gallery was one of the most harrowing of my life. The sheer dimension of the human suffering and the tragedy of the wanton and cruel loss of life left a lasting impression on me. Frankly, the enormity of what happened in Omagh is difficult to comprehend.

I heard the desolation in the words of Michael Gallagher, whose son was killed in the bomb, as he told us that evening that the families did not expect anyone to be convicted of the atrocity and that the best that they could hope for was to get to the truth. His words were profound and moving. The least that the Omagh families could expect is the establishment by the United Kingdom Prime Minister and the Taoiseach of a properly instituted, cross-border inquiry to determine the truth of that wicked and cruel event in Omagh.

The cross-border nature of such an inquiry remains essential because of the legal technicalities of operating across two legal jurisdictions and two legal frameworks with different methods of evidence taking. The Assembly should encompass that in its explicit and unequivocal support for the call for a cross-border inquiry that the Omagh families made that evening six months ago in the Long Gallery, and it is hoped that it does.

It is a pity that an Ulster Unionist amendment that called for such an inquiry was not accepted for the debate. As there is no other method of including the wishes of the families in the debate, the hope on the Ulster Unionist Benches is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will, at their earliest opportunity, place an inquiry at the forefront of any representations that they might have with the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.

I share and concur with Mr Buchanan's request to the House not to divide on this issue. For heaven's sake, as a house of representatives, let us show solidarity with the Omagh families, and let us do so accordingly and, it is hoped, with dignity and integrity in their names and at their request.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the debate. The motion is one of a school of motions around injustices and miscarriages of justice in this part of the world in which this Chamber can prove itself to be effective and strong in raising the voices of those in our community who have difficulty in being heard. It is in that spirit that I speak in the debate.

The SDLP supports the motion for two reasons. First, along with Mr McNarry, we support the call of the families for an independent judicial international public cross-border inquiry. Ten years after the bomb in Omagh, people are still trying to obscure the truth, and they are not only those in the security forces and agencies, but also those in illegal organisations. Therefore, the only basis on which people can have confidence that the truth will be seen to be disclosed is to have an independent cross-border inquiry.

Secondly, in supporting the motion, we support the words of Mr Buchanan — words that are not in the DUP amendment — that the information currently held by the security services needs to be shared, as a matter of urgency, with the families and their lawyers. It may well be that the civil action being taken by the families against several individuals may end before the secret review by the Intelligence Services Commissioner is concluded. The information should be released urgently, given the time constraints that the families have with their civil action.

For the SDLP, and many people outside the Chamber, those are the two tests by which we should judge ourselves, and by which others — in particular the two Governments — should be judged.

As other Members have said, the Secretary of State has stated that no stone should be left unturned in respect of the Omagh bombing. Unless the Secretary of State measures himself against the need to share intelligence immediately and agrees with having an independent inquiry, stones will be left unturned.

Similarly, and equally, the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, cannot claim that civil action is the best way to find out what exactly happened in Omagh unless he tells Gordon Brown that the information that the intelligence services hold is shared with the families and their lawyers immediately. Unless Brian Cowen tells Gordon Brown that that is the measure against which he is judging himself and Gordon Brown, a stone will be left unturned.

I want to make some broader points. If, in the future, the security services gather intelligence and do nothing; gather intelligence and decide not to share it; or gather intelligence and decide to share only part of it or share part of it only later, we will not have learned the deeper truths of what happened in Omagh. Given the fact that MI5 has a significant role in the North and that it declares that most of its current work is in

respect of dissident republicans, and given the fact that those operations continue on a massive scale, we will not have learnt the fuller truths from the Omagh bombing, the 'Panorama' programme and the lessons of the past 10 years unless we have appropriate oversight and accountability mechanisms in place for the work of the security services in Northern Ireland.

Many shadows extend over the lives of families in Omagh. However, the biggest shadow is whether the bomb and the unnecessary deaths could have been avoided.

People in London, and, I fear, in Dublin, do not intend to answer those questions. We must ensure that they do.

Mr Bresland: There is no doubt that the Omagh bombing was the worst atrocity of the Troubles, claiming the lives of 29 people and two unborn babies; it affected the lives of many in my constituency and families in Donegal and Spain. The atrocity had a tragic impact on the people of Omagh, who have sought, where possible, to rebuild their lives and their communities. Many in my constituency continue to suffer great pain as a result of what happened that day, and the failure to prosecute anyone for the hideous crime has caused further pain.

Thousands of words have been written about the atrocity, television programmes have been made and debates held. However, the republican terrorists who planned the attack, made the bomb, assisted in its transport to Omagh and planted it in Market Street have yet to be brought to justice. The motion fails to condemn the republican terrorists who caused so much suffering to the people of Omagh and, regrettably, it seeks to refocus the blame on the forces of law and order.

Unfortunately, there has been considerable controversy in Omagh in recent months over the wording on the memorial to the bomb victims. However, we must not forget that those who planned and executed the attack were republican terrorists, and they did so believing that the attack on men, women and children would further their cause — the creation of a 32-county Republic of Ireland.

Amendment No 1 notes recent revelations and the failure to provide the security forces with the necessary information that might have prevented that hideous attack on Omagh. I welcome the confirmation from the Prime Minister that the Government will carry out a full review of the GCHQ tapes. Many in the community were shocked by the recent BBC programme on the Omagh bombing, and there are, without a doubt, many unanswered questions about GCHQ's role. I am also disappointed that the original investigation failed to bring about convictions. Amendment No 1 calls on the Government to institute a process to investigate the Omagh bombing in an open and transparent way and

in co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Ireland. There is no doubt in my mind that the bomb was made in the Republic of Ireland and then transported to Omagh; therefore it is vital that the authorities in the Republic of Ireland co-operate, in all ways, to bring those responsible to justice.

The people of Omagh require justice, and those responsible for the atrocity must be brought before the courts and, eventually, to prison. Such an outcome can be achieved only through the provision of evidence, and I am convinced that there are people in the republican community — in County Monaghan, where the bomb was made and in County Tyrone, where it was tragically planted — who have the necessary evidence and yet have failed to provide it to the police.

Days after the bombing, Sinn Féin leaders stood on the steps of Omagh courthouse, offering their so-called words of comfort to the people of my constituency. I call on the Sinn Féin Members sitting opposite to assist in the progress of justice by urging their community and supporters to provide the PSNI with evidence — which I believe exists — that would bring those murderers to justice.

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland's investigation into the Omagh bombing sets out clearly who was responsible for the bomb. She states that:

“The persons responsible for the Omagh bombing are the terrorists who planned and executed the atrocity.”

I support amendment No 1.

5.30 pm

Mr Doherty: I speak in favour of the motion and amendment No 2. Saturday 15 August 1998 will be forever embedded in the memories of people in Omagh, and further afield, as one of the darkest days of the conflict in Ireland. On that day, 29 innocent civilians and unborn twins lost their lives in what became known as the Omagh bomb. Once again, I express my ongoing condolences to the families of the Omagh victims. In addition to those who were killed, hundreds were physically and psychologically scarred by the dreadful events of that day.

My party and I are on record as supporting the families in their calls for truth and justice. The families' search for the truth has led them up many paths. Unfortunately, they have been frustrated, obstructed and left disappointed on many occasions. The circumstances surrounding the Omagh bomb have left many unanswered questions. The judge who presided over the Omagh bomb trial raised a number of very serious concerns about the conduct of the investigation into the bomb and the evidence provided by a number of PSNI officers.

Furthermore, the Policing Board's report into the Omagh bomb investigation, which was published

earlier this year, lacked substance in a number of key areas and left many of the questions that were raised by the trial judge unanswered. The very limited nature of that report strengthens the call for a fully independent cross-border public inquiry into the events surrounding the Omagh bomb.

The original motion that was proposed to the Assembly for debate by the Omagh Support and Self Help Group some five months ago states:

“That this Assembly calls upon the British and Irish Governments to initiate a fully independent cross-border public inquiry with international input into the circumstances surrounding the Omagh Bomb.”

That is the core of what the House should support today — a full disclosure of all the facts from both the Irish and British Governments. The so-called republican dissident group that was responsible for the Omagh bomb must be totally condemned. It should disband — it serves no cause, it has no strategy, it has no public support, and it is heavily infiltrated.

I can relate to the passion and conviction with which Tom Buchanan delivered his speech. However, amendment No 1 — tabled by the DUP — prejudices the outcome of any potential investigation. Indeed, amendment No 1 sits ill at ease with a motion that Tom Buchanan proposed to Omagh District Council in July 2005. I urge the DUP to reconsider and to support the Alliance Party motion. My party will support that motion and abstain on the DUP amendment. It is with some regret that I will abstain, because I appreciate the commitment of Tom Buchanan and his party colleague Allan Bresland in respect of this matter.

I reiterate my condolences to the families, and I commend their unstinting quest for the truth about the deaths of their loved ones. I call on all Members of the House to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: News of the awful tragedy in Omagh reached me when I was carrying out my duties as a Member of the European Parliament.

I had some trouble getting home, and all the way home, my heart was torn because of what had happened. Immediately on arriving home in the middle of the night, I went to see for myself what was left. As I stood among the rubble, as I saw the stains of blood, and as I thought of homes where there would be no sleep that night but only tears and sorrow, my heart was rent. The next day, I visited every possible home that had suffered bereavements and to which I could get access. It is well known in the House that my father's people come from the Omagh district. It was a tragedy.

It would be a tragedy if the House did not unite tonight. I do not see any reason why the matters, which are being dealt with in various ways, should not be agreed. The people of Northern Ireland, the people of

the South of Ireland and the people of the world would then know that, on this matter, we are one.

I regret some of the remarks made by the proposer of amendment No 2, Mr Ford. I regret his condemnation of what he thought the DUP amendment was about. The DUP amendment states facts with which no one disagrees. If anyone does disagree, he or she can say so, but all Members condemn the republican terrorists who were responsible for the murder of 29 people. I do not understand why the motion does not mention the deaths of two unborn children.

Mr Ford: We have mentioned that.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Where is that mentioned?

Some Members: In amendment No 2.

Mr Ford: Amendment No 2 specifically inserts that reference. I make clear, as I did in my speech — which Mr Bresland did not appear to hear — that the point of today's motion is to deal with the issue of undisclosed information held by the security services. I thought that it was quite clear that every Member condemned the terrorists who were responsible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, you have one extra minute in which to speak.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am glad to hear the Member's explanation that the amendment mentions the two babes. Who can mention that particularly awful tragedy, the worst act of brutal murder during the Troubles, without rightly saying what took place? The DUP amendment says that in the plainest possible manner. It notes the revelations about the breakdown of the provision of information; I do not know whether any Member has not noted those revelations, and I am sure that everyone agrees that those should be noted.

All Members can agree that as our amendment states, the matter should be investigated in a way that is open, transparent and commands the confidence of the community in co-operation with the Government of the Irish Republic. Everyone will wonder at the fact that there are Members who cannot agree to that.

We all have different points of view. The spokesman for Sinn Féin told us how he felt about the matter. He has his feelings and I have my feelings, but, tonight, we can do something to help. People from the Omagh district who have talked to members of my party feel that the matters that are contained in our amendment are close to their hearts. They need to know, one by one, whether Members are for that or not.

I feel very strongly about this matter. It is an absolute disgrace that all we have had from our Government is what the Prime Minister told us: that he was going to have this looked into. That means that he will present a report from the Dispatch Box some day, and say that nothing more will be done. We can

prevent that from happening by uniting in condemning the failure of the authorities to act the way that they should have. By doing so, Members would act in the best interests of everyone concerned.

It is not for Members to try to reach a finding. We must support a call for the Government to be decent and honourable and to do what they must in order to bring peace of heart and mind to the people affected by the Omagh bomb.

Mr Elliott: On 15 August 1998, the Real IRA detonated a massive bomb in Market Street, Omagh, killing 29 people and unborn twins. The 220 people who were injured and the thousands whose lives were affected are sometimes forgotten. It is unfortunate that no one has been brought to justice for the atrocity in the ensuing years.

Mr McNarry spoke about the event that he held six months ago in the Long Gallery for the families at which he heard some of their experiences. He described it as one of, if not the, most harrowing days of his life. I was there and felt the same way. I was also in Omagh the day after that bomb. I do not think that anything can compare to the chilling atmosphere of the town on that day. I can only try to understand and imagine what it was like for the bereaved families and the entire community of Omagh on that and subsequent days.

However, it must be recognised, and never forgotten, that the sole responsibility for the Omagh bombing lies with republican terrorists who paid no regard to the sanctity of human life, who were barbaric in their intent, and whose cause can never be justified through violence or abuse either here or further afield.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled an amendment to this motion. That amendment called for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urgently raise with the UK Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, the need for the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of the Republic of Ireland to examine the scope for a cross-border independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding that 1998 bombing. Without an independent inquiry, we may never get to the bottom of all the issues that surround that tragic event. The families of those who were killed and have suffered have endured too many false dawns.

In the absence of its own amendment, the Ulster Unionist Party is supporting the one tabled by Mr Buchanan. I recognise and support the thrust of the Alliance Party motion. However, it is undeliverable. It also has the potential to jeopardise ongoing intelligence operations into dissident republican activity, which, unfortunately, has again raised its ugly head in this Province — particularly in the west.

If we call for full disclosure, there is a danger that live intelligence operations will be compromised. With the current levels of dissident republican activity, that

might put other lives at risk, and it is a step that the Ulster Unionist Party is not prepared to take.

5.45 pm

That said, the recent revelations in the BBC's 'Panorama' programme, concerning the monitoring and recording of some of the Real IRA terrorists by the Government Communications Headquarters, must be fully investigated and the findings openly and transparently shared with the public. The information in those recordings might have prevented the bombing, and the UK Government must thoroughly investigate the matter and bring it to light. However, we should not raise the hopes of the families involved unnecessarily. There is a likelihood that the findings of any investigation will not produce the results that the victims' families had hoped for. That is why we preferred the call to examine the scope for a cross-border independent inquiry.

Dissident republican terrorist activity is with us again, and everyone in the Chamber and beyond should do all in their power to bring active terrorists and those responsible for the Omagh bombing to justice. The Government have a responsibility to uphold public safety, and that includes the current safety of the public. That is why we call on the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to examine the scope for an independent cross-border inquiry.

Mr Durkan: As other Members said, the motion and the amendments touch on a landmark atrocity that created so many victims in Omagh — victims to whom many promises and assurances were given but few of which have been honoured. It is important that we remember that, as we consider the issues and consider also what is required not only for the families of the dead victims of Omagh but for the entire population of Omagh and for the entire public interest of the region.

We must be clear in our discussions about the issues involved and in the different emphases and interpretations that are at play in this debate. I join with others in saying that we do not want acrimonious division or difficulties here. People want straight talking, and they want straightforward action from political representatives in this regard. The families have heard too many phoney condolences and empty platitudes.

The phrase "no stone unturned" has been used several times today; but all that the families of the Omagh bomb victims have had is "no cliché unused" repeated again and again. More than 10 years on, families have been left in their grief suffering the profound grievance that basic promises made to them have not been kept. Those are promises that we should want not only for those families but for all of us, because there is no basic pledge of common security and the common law unless authorities act with

propriety and pursue matters such as this genuinely and honestly. Yet the calls for public inquiries have gone unanswered.

For a long time, few of us joined the families in their calls for a cross-border public inquiry. I am glad that more people now realise that there is a compelling case for a cross-border public inquiry, but that may be because people now realise that the likelihood of prosecutions is much diminished. Nevertheless, I welcome the fact that people have at least come to that conclusion, but why can we not baldly state that in the motion? I would have preferred the motion to be more explicit, but I respect fully the terms in which Mr Ford has spoken. I believe that the motion, as amended by amendment No 2, is clear, concise and compelling. We need to ensure that no one in Government in London, Dublin or elsewhere, can make any mistake about what we want to see and about the onus that is on them.

The Governments need to know that the onus rests on them to answer the pleas of the bereaved families and that they must live up to the promises that were made, not just in their name, but in our name. Those promises were made to all of us, not just to the families. We should be as angry and as aggrieved as the bereaved Omagh families. That is why we should be explicit in seeking such an inquiry.

The issues that were raised by the 'Panorama' programme only add to the questions that already existed. I hope that Members of the Assembly who are also Members of another Parliament will support an early-day motion that I have tabled that specifically calls on the British Government to release, in a timely fashion, the information that would help the families to put their case.

Along with Sir Reg Empey, I raised that issue with the Prime Minister when he was here, and he assured us of his consideration of the matter. He then made his move by appointing Sir Peter Gibson. After all the false promises that were made to the Omagh families, to hand a matter of this complexity and seriousness to a safe knight to present a report, in an open and shut way — possibly in Parliament, possibly not — is simply not good enough, as Dr Paisley rightly said. Clarity and sincerity, as clearly expressed and demanded by this Assembly, should not be too much for the families, who have travelled here from Omagh, to ask for.

Dr Deeny: I add my condolences to the bereaved families, as I have done for the past 10 years. I remember the day of the bombing as being the most awful day that any of us who is involved in healthcare will ever come across. None of us was trained for that type of scene. I lost three patients from both communities that day, and many hundreds of people were injured.

Afterwards, I remember thinking that it was the second-busiest Saturday of the year — other than the Saturday before Christmas — in our county town. I also wondered how it could have happened. There had been several bomb scares in different towns that year, and indeed, there had been a carbon copy of the Omagh bombing in Banbridge two weeks previously. Phone calls were made by a so-called informer who gave a date for the bombing, saying that it would take place in a large town. Subsequent phone calls were made, warning that the bombing would take place in Omagh. I could not understand how the car could have been parked where it was, nor could I believe, given the previous warnings and given that there are not many roads into the town, why Omagh could not have been cordoned off. The former Police Ombudsman also made that point. From the word go, I thought that something was not right and that there was something evil about that event.

The recent revelations of the 'Panorama' programme only add to our concerns. We also know, as was mentioned earlier, that statements were made by senior people in Government and in the Police Service. I remember them saying that the people who were responsible for the bomb would be hunted down and that no stone would be left unturned. That gave initial hope to the families and to the whole community, but we know what happened, or more correctly, did not happen.

As political representatives, it is our duty to the people of Omagh to leave no stone unturned. That is why I, along with the Alliance Party, ask Members to support the motion and amendment No 2.

I know that this is a very emotive issue for the people of West Tyrone, but the DUP amendment focuses too much on condemning the perpetrators of what was an evil act. However, we have done that from day one, time after time. The motion is about the acquisition and disclosure of information that many people, North and South, believe exists.

At the core of the motion is the call for the acquisition and disclosure of relevant information. I could not agree more with Mr Attwood that that disclosure is needed urgently so that the families can use it in the civil case that they are bringing. Those evil people must be brought to justice so that the victims' families can have closure.

Hundreds were injured and 31 human beings killed that day. Dr Paisley is right to mention that 31 people were killed, although it is also mentioned in amendment No 2. The victims' families need our help, and they need justice. I say that as a doctor, because I have no doubt that the uncertainty, and the lengths to which those families have had to go, is having a detrimental effect on their physical, mental and emotional health. The huge legal wound is still open

and continues to fester. For the sake of the health of the families, justice must be done. As Members of the devolved Government, we must do all that we can to bring closure to this sorry and agonising situation, which began with that terrible atrocity just over 10 years ago in the county town of Omagh.

I do not want the House to divide on this issue; we must speak with one voice, whatever it may take. We cannot split on the issue; it is vital to the families of Omagh that we speak with one voice. I ask all Members to support the motion and amendment No 2.

Mrs D Kelly: The phrase "no stone left unturned" has been used often in the debate this afternoon. It was the promise made to the bereaved families and the survivors of the Omagh bomb, in its immediate aftermath, by the then Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan. That promise was repeated in recent weeks by the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, in response to Gordon Brown's announcement of a review of intelligence handling, following the revelations contained in September's 'Panorama' programme. Many people have been left wondering whether the bomb could have been intercepted or whether those responsible could have been brought to justice, had all the available intelligence been shared in a timely manner.

However, let me be clear: the SDLP and many others have stated today that responsibility for the Omagh bomb lies solely with those who planned and planted it. The Omagh families are clear on that point and have raised it in all their presentations. They were very strong on that issue in the presentation hosted recently by Mr McNarry in the Long Gallery.

Mr McElduff rightly paid tribute to the nurses and doctors who worked hard to save lives. The House should also commend those police officers and firefighters who sought to save lives and who worked in very difficult and emotive circumstances. I pay tribute to them and to the many volunteers who assisted in the search for bodies and for the injured and who tried to bring them to medical treatment as quickly as possible.

The present Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde, said that a successful prosecution is unlikely unless witnesses come forward; some Members made that very point today. Even at this late stage, we reiterate our call that anyone who has information should come forward. Many Members feel that the failure to do so gives succour to those who planted the bomb. Some of the guilt may lie with those who say nothing.

The Omagh families — like so many families affected by the conflict of the past 30 to 40 years — are not, at this stage, likely to see justice served unless witnesses come forward. They want the truth, and many of them have made impassioned pleas for it.

Where does the truth lie and how do we obtain it? It is clear, as Mr Ford said, that the track record of the Intelligence Services Commissioner in presenting evidence about security intelligence handling does not inspire confidence. He has never upheld any case made against the handling of intelligence.

Therefore, the motion and amendment No 2, which Mr Ford and his colleagues tabled, go a long way to meeting the reasonable demands of the families affected by, and the survivors of, the Omagh bomb. Like all others, we do not want the House to divide on the matter.

6.00 pm

We ask those Members who tabled amendment No 1 to reconsider it. The Omagh families have made it clear that unless inquiries are open and transparent and have legal accountability and a legal framework in which to operate, there will be little opportunity for some people who hold information to present themselves as witnesses. Moreover, they may be less willing to appear as witnesses. We have seen that happen with past inquiries. An inquiry must have the power to demand reports that the intelligence services hold and to compel witnesses to give evidence.

The Omagh families have also been at pains to point out that we must learn about contingency planning, and that lessons must be learned about how the situation was handled on the day of the bombing. No Member can deny that lessons can be learned. In the aftermath of 9/11, the various emergency services shared information and examined how the situation could have been better handled. One finding that emerged was that the emergency services were not even operating on the same radio frequency.

I ask DUP Members to reconsider their amendment and to give their full and unopposed support to the motion and amendment No 2.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Lord Morrow: At the outset, I reckon that whatever has been, and might be, said in the House today will fall far short of what should be said on such a motion. I am disappointed that some Members have attempted to rubbish amendment No 1. We tabled the amendment because we felt that the motion did not go far enough. I am disappointed by a couple of Members' remarks. I listened carefully to what Dr Deeny said. He said that amendment No 1 majors too much on condemnation. It is not possible to condemn enough those who perpetrated that atrocity; that cannot be overdone. I regret that Dr Deeny said that here today.

Mr Attwood said that we are in some way reluctant about there being full disclosure. Let me be clear that when that 'Panorama' programme aired, I was either the first, or certainly among the first, to issue a public

statement that demanded full disclosure of information. If any Member misunderstands my position on full disclosure, I want him or her to ask me about it. I want full disclosure on what happened in Omagh on that particular day. I am not particular about whom that hurts. I have no brief for anybody who has withheld information, because justice must be done. However, it is more than that — justice must be seen to be done.

That is the irony of today's situation. In the Chamber, it is easy for Members to condemn the bombing — we are all doing it, but more must be done. Are Members unequivocal in their support for those on the ground who want to see justice done? Is something else holding Members back from going the full distance? I want to go the full distance, and I make that very clear.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Lord Morrow: I want to go the extra mile. I am disappointed that some Members feel that, in some way, we have tried to be woolly about the situation. Our amendment is quite the opposite. We are determined to get to the bottom of the situation, and we are not particular about whom that will offend.

Mr McCarthy: Has the Member discussed his amendment with the people who matter — those who suffered in the Omagh bombing?

Lord Morrow: If Mr McCarthy is asking whether I have spoken to the people of Omagh, the answer is yes. I live in County Tyrone, I worked in Omagh, I have relations in Omagh, and I have family roots there. Some of my relations had a narrow escape that day; thankfully, they were not caught in the bomb. Therefore, I am acutely aware of the sensitivities that surround the issue.

Amendment No 1 states that it: "notes the recent revelations". That is reference to the recent 'Panorama' programme, and we are saying that, because of the revelations in that programme, there must be a full disclosure of information. We will not settle for anything less. Any inadequacies must be exposed and examined. Although my colleagues and Tom Elliott made the intentions of amendment No 1 clear, I hope that my comments dispel any doubt. We implore the House to support amendment No 1, which goes much further than the motion. It is important that the House sends a clear message, not a garbled one.

Has Sinn Féin got any information about past colleagues, or anyone else, that it can pass on to the police? It must be noted that when the atrocity occurred, Sinn Féin held back — it was reluctant, it was not clear cut, and it did not meet expectations. However, Sinn Féin still has the chance to redeem itself, and the public demands that it does so. The House and the Omagh relatives demand that all public representatives do their duty and declare —

unambiguously and definitively — their desire for a full disclosure of information on the atrocity. I hope that the House unites behind amendment No 1.

Mrs Long: As each Member who spoke recognised, the Omagh families suffered greatly on that August day in 1998. Although those losses can never be undone and the scars will never fully heal, the families have continued to suffer over the past 10 years, because their right to justice has been denied and frustrated and their access to the truth has been blocked. There is not much that we can do in that kind of situation, but we can make a contribution by helping families to get the truth.

That is why we focused on the issue of full disclosure in the motion and amendment No 2. In addition to the pain and burden that they already carry, we do not want the Omagh families to be left with the question of “what if” hanging over them for the rest of their lives. However, the motion is not just about the truth; it is about trying to identify what went wrong with the security services that day; it is about establishing whether it was processes or people that failed; and it is about ensuring that what happened is scrutinised and, importantly, never repeated.

In his opening remarks, David Ford, respectfully, recognised the suffering of those who were bereaved and injured by the bomb. No Member is saying that the issue is not sensitive or difficult. In our motion, we sought the unity of the Assembly and to call for something specific, not to ask the British and Irish Governments to examine a process, but to call for something that would deliver for the families.

Tom Buchanan highlighted, rightly, that there are people who harboured the guilty, have information and, even at this late stage, should co-operate with the police to assist the families with their quest for justice. I agree with Tom Buchanan, but surely his logic means that that obligation should be extended to those in GCHQ, the security services and the intelligence services, because, potentially, they have information that must be disclosed. They have a major role to play in the investigation, and in handing over that information.

I wish that those who proposed the amendment had spoken with us, as did others, because we were willing and flexible enough to have a composite approach that would not have forced division. However, tabling an amendment that runs contrary to some of the content in the motion makes it incredibly difficult to achieve a coherent result.

Barry McElduff recognised the suffering, and the enormity of what faced the emergency services on that day, as did several other Members, including his colleague Pat Doherty.

Lord Morrow: The Member said that she was disappointed that we made no approach to her or her party. I am the Chief Whip of the DUP group, which is next door to the Alliance Party, and at no time did any Alliance Party member ever think it worthwhile to knock my door and come round for a consultation.

Mrs Long: That is an admission that the DUP did not speak to us about our motion, as did other parties.

Mr McNarry, I believe, referred to the families' call for that process to operate in both jurisdictions, with the prospect, if not of delivering justice, of at least giving them the truth, and we concur with that view.

Alex Attwood rightly emphasised the independence of any inquiry, and rightly noted, given that the civil case is under way, that there is an urgency to the process with regard to the disclosure of evidence.

Sadly, Allan Bresland suggested that the motion was an attack on the security forces. I refute that suggestion. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I am saddened that anyone would suggest otherwise.

Tom Buchanan made a case against full disclosure, because it could compromise the ongoing work of the security services against dissident republicans. We recognise that, in every jurisdiction, there is a need for security and intelligence in counter-terrorism, that counter-terrorism is, by its nature, secretive, and that sources must be protected. We are not naive. However, the public has a right to expect that those working in such services are, at all times, acting to the highest standards and in the interests of protecting the public.

There is considerable doubt in the public mind that that is always the case, and nowhere is that lack of confidence more evident than in the Omagh case. The allegation that GCHQ had intercept evidence that could have prevented a bomb being planted, and the further allegation that the information was not handed to local detectives to allow them to use it in pursuit of the guilty are major concerns. Unfortunately, only full disclosure can set those allegations to rest in people's minds. Allowing secrecy to cloud the issue is incredibly dangerous for public confidence.

Mark Durkan called for clarity, and I agree. The proposed amendment confuses the issue. Furthermore, he was also right — as were many others — to highlight the empty promises of the different Governments. Kieran Deeny had first-hand experience of the tragedy, and he is right that the condemnation of the terrorists who planted the bomb stands.

The motion is about obtaining the information that the families seek. Dolores Kelly quite rightly called on all those who have information or evidence to come forward. I support her 100% in that call.

Lord Morrow called for no division, but the way that he treated the remarks created a sense of division.

There is no division in the spirit of what people are trying to do, even though we may take a slightly different approach. I hope that that is accepted, even by those Members of the DUP who amended the motion. Lord Morrow said that he was committed to full disclosure. However, the words “full disclosure” are not in the DUP’s amendment.

I make it clear that the motion is not designed to shift the blame for the carnage in Omagh onto the security services or the local police. Those who are ultimately responsible for the death and destruction, and its legacy on the families of the victims and survivors, are those who built, primed, planted and detonated that device, and those who took the car, parked it in the centre of Omagh, and walked away into the crowds that they were about to decimate.

Nothing in our motion diminishes the bombers’ responsibility for the choices that they made, the actions that they took, and the lives that they destroyed. That is not the motion’s focus. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on Governments to do all that they can to protect their citizens from such attacks and to ensure that justice is delivered to the victims of those attacks when they occur. The families who have been affected by the Omagh bombing believe that neither has been achieved. They seek the truth; they deserve nothing less.

6.15 pm

The Omagh bombing is a sensitive issue that requires the House to form a united front. Even at this late stage, I appeal to the proposers of amendment No 1 to support the motion and amendment No 2 so that the Assembly has a united position and can act on the matter in that spirit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if that amendment is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. I will then proceed to put the Question on the motion, as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the republican terrorists responsible for the murder of the 29 people and two unborn children in Omagh on 15 August 1998; recognises that they alone were responsible for this tragedy; notes the recent revelations about the possible breakdown in the provision of information which may have assisted in the prevention of the bombing; and calls on the UK Government to urgently institute a process to investigate the matter (i) in a way which is open, transparent, and commands the confidence of the community; and (ii) in co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Promoting the Tourist Potential of East Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Ross: When other Members have left, I will address what my colleague Jim Wells describes as “a hushed Chamber”. I am grateful to the Business Office for allowing me to raise the topic in the House this evening. I thank the Minister for her presence, and I apologise to those Members who have had to stay until such a late hour.

East Antrim is a magnificent constituency with breathtaking scenery and popular tourist attractions, drawing in walkers, cyclists, golfers and people who fish. As such, it could benefit greatly from the growing tourism industry, as envisaged by the Programme for Government.

Tourism is a growth industry in Northern Ireland. It is worth millions to the economy, and it provides thousands of jobs throughout the country, many of which provide seasonal opportunities for students during peak visitor times. I noted the extent of that tourism growth in a comment that my colleague Jimmy Spratt made when he recognised the number of cruise ships that now come to Northern Ireland and the number of tourists who are on those ships. That is certainly to be welcomed.

That tourism was given such a central place in the Programme for Government is also to be welcomed. It has gained around £60 million in capital investments. Targets have been set for visitor numbers to increase by around 25% over the next three years. In recent years, local hotels, particularly in Belfast, have occupancy rates of almost 70% at times, which demonstrates clearly the number of visitors who now come to the Province.

However, despite that, tourism represents a tiny proportion — only 2% — of Northern Ireland’s GDP, whereas that figure is higher in neighbouring countries. In Wales, that figure is 11%, and in the Irish Republic, it is 9%. Clearly, we are still catching up from our troubled past, when tourists were too frightened to come to Northern Ireland because of the republican terrorist campaign waged in our Province. Despite

recent posturing by some, we now hope that we have sufficient political stability to grow our tourist industry and bring more people to visit Northern Ireland.

The motion refers specifically to East Antrim, but many parts of the country will find it relevant and many of the issues that will be raised will apply to other constituencies. East Antrim is geographically well-positioned to reap the benefits from tourism. It is the gateway to the north coast, and large parts of the constituency lie in close proximity to Belfast. East Antrim should be able to catch tourists attracted by the stand-out attractions of Belfast or the Giant's Causeway. However, we do not want tourists to simply pass through East Antrim; we want them to stop en route along the breathtaking coast road, and spend some time — and, crucially, money — in the constituency.

The port of Larne is one of the busiest in the United Kingdom, and the number of tourists who come from Scotland in particular has grown in recent years. With the credit crunch and the stretching of family finances, many more in Scotland will decide to holiday closer to home, since foreign holidays and other luxuries are often the first items to go when times are tough. Unfortunately, however, most tourists do not stay in Larne, even for an overnight stay or a meal. Many coach trips arrive in the port but do not spend any time in the town. There has to be development in that respect, and places of interest must be promoted to visitors.

I know of several smaller bed and breakfasts whose owners are frustrated that they do not get passing business because they are prevented from erecting certain types of signage to alert people to their existence. Despite the signage on the scenic loop route past Island Magee, there needs to be further signage so that visitors realise that there are places to stay in the area and places to visit nearby. Villages such as Ballycarry seek more effective promotion — some local businesses there are popular with those tourists who just happen to stumble across them and who are delighted at that traditional small Ulster village.

Those in the tourism industry are frustrated that Northern Ireland is not specifically promoted as a tourist destination and, therefore, places such as East Antrim lose out to a greater degree than they would otherwise to more popular attractions in the Province. Tourism Ireland focuses on the images of shamrocks and leprechauns. Those images are alien to most of us in Northern Ireland, who are proud to have historic, cultural and religious links with rest of the United Kingdom — yet Northern Ireland has not been promoted specifically outside of the island of Ireland. The approach to promotion and marketing of tourism is very fragmented, with little flexibility, even among bodies charged to do just that.

This is a massive issue, and one that I have raised before in the Chamber. I am pleased that, over the past year, Northern Ireland-specific merchandise has gone on sale at airports in Belfast, whereas, previously, tourists returning from our two major airports could have been forgiven for thinking that they were in Dublin, because there were no locally focused tourism products available.

I mentioned the historic, cultural and religious links that Northern Ireland shares with the rest of the UK. Ulster-Scots culture is particularly strong in East Antrim. I and several other MLAs from the area have been to well-attended events during the summer, in Cairncastle and Ballygally in particular. I pay tribute to Bobby Acheson, David Hume and others in East Antrim who take on much of the burden of organising events such as the Cairncastle Ulster-Scots Folk Festival and the Broadisland Gathering Festival.

Those events are attended not just by people from Northern Ireland, but by a sizeable number of visitors from Scotland. At the last such event that I attended, several people from New Zealand and the United States were there. I have written to the First Minister to ask him to consider what he can do to promote our culture, and I have asked broadcasters to give more airtime to music associated with Ulster Scots, which is a popular and growing cultural phenomenon, particularly in East Antrim. It is even popular with young people.

That aspect of tourism should not just be exploited locally — there is huge potential in attracting visitors from the United States, as was clear from the success of the Smithsonian events in the US last year. Larne has a long-standing connection with the United States, because it was from that port that many immigrants departed for a new life in America. Larne ships transported people to America for many years, and a memorial testifying to that is situated in Curran Park in the town.

The Ulster American Society of Larne was established over a decade ago and, since then, the town has been twinned with other towns in South Carolina. In Carrickfergus, the Andrew Jackson Cottage and US Rangers Centre includes an example of the traditional Ulster-Scots farmhouse from which the parents of President Andrew Jackson emigrated in 1765.

Other interesting historical attractions in the constituency include the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which has an opportunity to use the old-style food carriages for corporate events. We are looking at business tourism as well; not just at attracting people who are on their holidays. We can attract business people and others to the area through events such as that.

Activities such as walking and cycling are not promoted enough. Carnfunnock Country Park is one

such example, with stunning walking trails, views and gardens, and it is particularly popular with families in the area. Ballygally and Carnlough, at the upper end of the constituency, are picturesque villages with very nice scenery indeed.

Perhaps the most recognised landmark in East Antrim is Carrickfergus Castle, which could also be utilised to a greater degree by holding gala events or medieval banquets there. My colleague David Hilditch will refer to that in more detail.

I will highlight two specific projects within the constituency that I believe could greatly improve the potential for tourism. First is the development plan for the Magheramorne Quarry, where a unique multi-million pound eco-village, world-class biking track, diving school, film studios and a number of other tourist attractions are planned. It is a very exciting project, particularly for those in the constituency. I hope that we will see work begin there very soon.

There is also a project to oversee the restoration of the Gobbins cliff path and the Causeway coastal route, which perfectly links Belfast, at the south of the constituency, to the Causeway at the north. That again is a very exciting project, and it is hoped that we will see it progress in years to come.

Tourism must be exploited to the full, and I hope that the Executive can assist in every way possible. I know that other Members will wish to mention other important issues, so I will conclude. I welcome the opportunity to highlight the constituency.

Mr Beggs: The East Antrim constituency, incorporating Larne, Carrickfergus, and parts of Newtownabbey, is full of areas of outstanding natural beauty that are particularly associated with its coastal location. It is good that the Causeway Coast and Glens partnership has been developed in order to provide an identity for the region that can be marketed regionally and internationally. However, more needs to be done.

The East Antrim constituency is often seen simply as the gateway to the glens, yet it has many noteworthy facilities and areas of beauty. There is the preserved Norman castle in Carrickfergus, which is the focal point for the history of the immediate area, and Northern Ireland as a region. Much history emanates from that site. The structure is noteworthy, but more interactive displays and items of historical interest are required to keep the visitors' attention. More items of genuine historical interest would also be useful.

Is the Environment and Heritage Service, or as it is now called, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the best agency to preserve the building? Certainly, it is the best agency for preserving the structure, but more innovative ways of encouraging tourists' use of the facility must be considered. There has been an increase in activity in recent years, with events such as

medieval jousting and crafts, and that is to be welcomed. The events held have been popular. However, more is required. The harbour area is now a bustling attraction with a renovated promenade, a new marina and numerous restaurants to choose from.

Further up the coast, there is the town of Whitehead — a scenic Victorian town that has excelled in the Ulster in Bloom and Britain in Bloom floral competitions. A visit there in the summer is a must. As Mr Ross said, it is also the centre for the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which organises numerous trips on the railway network using its vintage vehicles.

Further up the coast, there is a neglected treasure from the Victorian age, which, hopefully, is on the verge of being restored. I refer to the Gobbins cliff path in Islandmagee. Members will be aware of the recent upsurge in interest in the Gobbins, which has been stimulated to some extent by a recent episode of the BBC's 'Coast' series, which highlighted both its glorious past and its potentially glorious future.

Last weekend, I was fortunate to be taken by Peter Steele on the North Irish Diver to view the impressive cliff face and wildlife along the coastline.

The North Irish Diver is used to carry divers to the numerous wrecks that dot the immediate area; that potential for tourism should be developed further.

6.30 pm

The current £6 million scheme is dependent on funding coming from a variety of sources, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Environment and Heritage Service, INTERREG, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). If that scheme is to be delivered, help must be provided, through DETI, by central Government and the Tourist Board. Substantial funding has been identified from other bodies, and huge potential exists for delivering a significant tourist project.

There are already numerous bed and breakfast facilities in the area. At Ford Farm, for example, there is a small camping barn and caravan site at the edge of Larne Lough, which is an area of special scientific interest and a Ramsar site, for those with an interest in wildlife. There is a growing interest in nature and an increasing interest in walking for pleasure and for health. Coastal walking forms a sizeable tourism segment in many parts of Great Britain. The National Trust has already developed walks at Portmuck and Brown's Bay, and I hope that eventually the Gobbins pathway can be restored and the network completed, so that visitors can enjoy the spectacular coastal views.

Further north is the village of Glynn and the town of Larne. As Mr Ross indicated, the Carnfunnock Country Park is particularly noteworthy, and worth a

visit by people of all ages; there are play facilities, walled gardens, and many walks. At Glenarm, the marina has recently been renovated. There is also a castle with a garden and tea rooms; throughout the year, it is the centre for many activities.

Finally, there is the village of Carnlough. A visit there would not be complete without a walk around the harbour and a visit to the historic Londonderry Arms. East Antrim is a hidden gem, and if more people knew about it, they would choose to visit it.

Mr Neeson: As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I am only too aware of the importance of tourism to the economy of Northern Ireland, and of the growing number of visitors that we are getting. I welcome the number of airlines now operating all around Europe, which are bringing visitors to Northern Ireland. Hopefully, many of those visitors will come to East Antrim, which has a great deal to offer. However, it is important that we get the tourist product right.

Infrastructure is very important, and that includes the updating of the Carrickfergus to Belfast road, the A2, and the Larne to Belfast road, the A8. Co-operation between the local councils is important, and one very good example of that is the Mid-Antrim Museums Service, which involves Larne, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, and Ballymena councils. Over the last four years, in each of those areas, a major heritage product has been developed. There is the museum in Carrick; Sentry Hill in Newtownabbey; the refurbished Larne Museum; and the Ballymena civic centre.

A lot has been said about Carrickfergus Castle. I think that all of us from East Antrim agree that more could be done with the castle itself, in particular the question of opening hours. The opening hours are not conducive to the tourist trade, and Carrickfergus Borough Council has been trying to make changes to that.

I am glad that the Minister is here today. The Tourist Board promised funding for the development of a son et lumière show at Carrickfergus Castle; that funding has not materialised. Recently, I met Tourist Board officials, and I hope that that will go on the agenda.

Mr Ross mentioned the need for functions and so forth at the castle. I must admit that one of my proudest achievements was helping to organise the very first Lughnasa Medieval Fair, way back in 1971.

The promotion of Carrickfergus as a walled town is also important to its heritage, and David Hilditch is extremely involved in the movement to preserve walled cities and towns.

The previous two Members who spoke referred to the reopening of the Gobbins cliff path, and that must be a priority. One need only look at the popularity of the walk along the Blackhead path and the number of

people that use it frequently to see that it would be an added attraction in the area. I am pleased to say that Carnfunnock Country Park, which is an excellent and well-used family facility, is also in the area. I welcome the use of Glenarm Castle for various activities in recent years, and many overseas visitors have been attracted to events there.

For several years, I have been working closely with the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, which is based at Whitehead, and volunteers have done an enormous amount to restore the engines and carriages. It is not only a major local attraction but a major national attraction.

The maritime area of Carrickfergus is now a major attraction, and I am pleased to say that the recently built Premier Inn has been granted planning permission for an extension. That shows how the tourist product is being developed in East Antrim.

It goes without saying that the Antrim coast road is, undoubtedly, one of the most scenic areas on the island of Ireland and, with the port of Larne acting as the gateway to the glens, the number of people using it in recent years has increased considerably. The area has much to offer tourists from near and far. The promotion of East Antrim must be more widely developed to realise its full potential.

I have a final point to make while the Minister is present. Much of the development does not involve only her Department, and, therefore, if the potential of the area is to be realised, an interdepartmental approach must be taken. I thank Mr Ross for securing the debate.

Mr Hilditch: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, on which I am chairman of tourism and marketing. I am also a director of the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership, a forum member of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau Regional Tourism Partnership and, as Sean mentioned, an executive member of the Walled Towns Friendship Circle.

I thank my colleague Mr Ross for securing the debate and bringing the matter to the Floor of the Assembly — and rightly so, as Northern Ireland is benefiting from changing times. Tourism is a growth industry that generates almost £800 million for the local economy and supports almost 30,000 full-time jobs and, equally importantly, numerous opportunities for part-time employment. I hope that, despite the global economic problems, the statistics continue to improve, as will what the area has to offer as a must-see tourist destination.

Of all the constituencies, East Antrim is one of the best strategically placed for infrastructure and inward travel. Within 15 minutes of leaving Belfast International Airport, George Best Belfast City Airport

or the Port of Belfast, out-of-state visitors can be in the heart of the constituency, which boasts its own port facilities at Larne. East Antrim can, therefore, be the gateway to Northern Ireland. One of the most important infrastructural developments in recent years is the Causeway coastal route, which was funded by central Government and delivered by the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership.

That specially signed route takes tourists off the M2, takes them through Whiteabbey, follows the A2 to the north and, eventually, leaves the constituency at the beginning of the glens of Antrim. That journey boasts many attractions in the local-authority areas of Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and Larne such as Loughshore Park, the wonderful development at Carnfunnock Country Park, Carrickfergus Marina — which has been awarded five gold anchors through the Yacht Harbour Association's gold anchor award scheme — the underdeveloped viewpoint at the Knockagh monument and the rich heritage and culture that is showcased by the Andrew Jackson cottage, Carrickfergus Castle and the town walls.

I commend the private and voluntary sector, which provides excellent accommodation in the constituency, and further developments are pending. Sean Neeson mentioned the Premier Inn. Moreover, the Knockagh Lodge, which was previously a roadhouse, will soon provide 31 rooms. That extension was secured with private-sector investment.

Flame, Ireland's award-winning gasworks museum is managed entirely by an enthusiastic team of volunteers, whose work is essential. Therefore, many people play roles in promoting tourism potential in East Antrim. I could go on, but I will sound like an episode of 'Wish You Were Here...?'. That is, perhaps, the origin of some of the problems. Much work is conducted in local government, central Government, the Departments and agencies, the private sector, the business community and the valuable voluntary sector. However, despite the best efforts of the majority, the delivery of a project or service can, at times, be fragmented or undeliverable.

Some of the worst examples apply to the jewel in the crown of East Antrim's tourist trade — Carrickfergus Castle. As Sean Neeson mentioned, the most disappointing non-delivery of a project in recent years was the proposed son et lumière at the castle. That Northern Ireland Tourist Board-led project included two other partners, namely Carrickfergus Borough Council and the former Environment and Heritage Service. Those two parties worked hard to fulfil resource and finance commitments and included a strategy in their business plans. However, NITB left them high and dry, and several years later, still refused to visit Carrickfergus Borough Council to discuss that issue and the ensuing difficulties.

The management of Carrickfergus Castle is important to those of us involved in the promotion of tourism. Recently, I provisionally booked banquets for two evenings in early June. That booking was accepted. However, 10 days later I received a letter that, rather than confirming my booking, outlined a new policy that permitted functions to be held in the castle on Monday to Thursday evenings only. Furthermore, groups had to vacate the premises by 9.00 pm, and no alcohol or marquees were permitted on the grounds. The first booking was for a group of Americans, led by the mayor of Danville from Kentucky, who were twinning with Carrickfergus. The second booking was for the European Walled Towns Friendship Circle, which had chosen Carrickfergus to host its annual executive meeting with representatives of nine European countries present. There would have been no better groups to which to showcase East Antrim's assets, but the facility was unavailable. The matter has been referred to the relevant Department and the relevant Minister.

Furthermore, the Territorial Army, which is celebrating its centenary, enquired about the facility at Carrickfergus Castle through the civic offices in Carrickfergus. Once again, the criteria and policy were outlined. I do not need to explain to Members the reaction to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's policy.

Those examples demonstrate how fragmented delivery can damage a product, and those matters will be discussed with the Department and the Minister. However, I do not believe that everyone in the agency shares the same attitude, which seems to say that it does not care if tourists ever cross the ramparts. Such examples indicate that a localised steering group for the delivery of tourism could be considered in partnership with central Government. However, that matter is for another day.

I thank Mr Ross for proposing this topic for the Adjournment debate. All Members share similar sentiments.

Mr K Robinson: I declare an interest as a councillor in Newtownabbey Borough Council. East Antrim has accepted tourists not just for the past several years but for the past few centuries and, indeed, since the beginning of the first millennium.

It was one of the first places to welcome people from the Stone Age to this island. It welcomed the Vikings and the Normans. It also welcomed the king of the campers, King William, who brought a multitude of European visitors with him. Most of them were very wise people, because, while the King arrived at Carrickfergus, quickly got on his horse and headed for one of the oldest buildings in Newtownabbey, the White House, most of his army went directly there.

That accommodation must have been more welcoming than Carrickfergus Castle, to which Mr Hilditch referred.

6.45 pm

East Antrim is the gateway to Northern Ireland. The port of Larne has 32 sailings each day that link us to north-west England and Scotland — with a footfall of approximately 25 million potential tourists. Has anyone in the Chamber ever been to the ferry terminals at Stranraer or Cairnryan and tried to lift a brochure for attractions in East Antrim? There will be brochures about the Northern Ireland lakes, the walled city of Londonderry, the Sperrins and St Patrick's Trail, but there will not be any brochures about East Antrim.

The port operates the short sea route to Britain, but we have lots of other networks, as other Members have mentioned. East Antrim is close to the two airports and to the port of Belfast. Increasing numbers of overseas — particularly American — tourists are captive on their ships in Belfast with no Titanic Quarter to see; or nothing worthwhile at the moment. Why do they not come to East Antrim? We have castles at Carrickfergus, Glenarm, and Ballygally, and, if we include North Antrim, visitors can go to Dunluce Castle, although it is not in the best of condition.

Most of the current projects in East Antrim are down to the initiative of the three borough councils, working separately or together or in combination with the Mid-Antrim Museums Service. There are jewels in each crown. Newtownabbey has not received much of a mention, but one of the national railway icons is located there; the Bleach Green viaduct is famous right across Great Britain because of its particular structure and format. Newtownabbey Borough Council only recently opened a pathway to allow people to view that particular splendour.

Community groups in Monkstown estate have brought an old industrial river — the Three Mile Water — back into life again, and it is now a salmon river. The area also contains Loughshore Park, which was mentioned; Hazelbank Park, which is an extension to the former; and the famous Gideon's Green, which was named after one of our overseas tourists — a French Huguenot — who left his mark on that particular part of Newtownabbey.

The cross-community Williamite theme could be developed. William landed in Carrickfergus and moved on to White House, Belfast, Hillsborough, Newry, Dundalk, Drogheda, and eventually to Dublin. The cross-border element should be tapped, because we know nothing about it. Despite the partial existence of the walls of Carrickfergus, only one walled city is promoted by the Tourist Board. With a little imagination, Carrickfergus could have a bigger footfall than Londonderry could ever have. Why is that not being developed?

Too many agencies are dipping their toes in the pond of East Antrim. None of them actually creates anything worthwhile. With the Minister here today, I would like to think that she will talk to her colleagues, so that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will all come together to promote a resource that is sitting there, waiting to be tapped. We have talked about the Gobbins path and the marinas at Glenarm and Carrickfergus. A lot of the infrastructure is in place; it just needs somebody to blow some life into it. However, the body that should be doing that — the Tourist board — seems to be passing it by.

Two sets of visitors come to East Antrim, one of which comprises those from Northern Ireland. The catchment area of greater Belfast — home to more than one million people — is not being tapped into. Across the north of the United Kingdom, there are approximately 25 million people. Again we are not tapping into that area. There is an Ulster-Scots diaspora in America, and we have already heard about some of the links that Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey have with that part of America. Andrew Jackson must not be mentioned to the Cherokee Indians — they have a particular view of him that is not helpful to our tourist industry. However, there is an affinity that could be tapped into, but the agencies are not breathing life into it.

Alastair Ross referred to the Ulster-Scots evening that he, Roy Beggs, Sammy Wilson and I attended recently, which consisted of self-help groups that struggle for money and for the attention of agencies. Something should be done to help them project the very worthwhile and unique culture beyond the local area.

Agencies are attempting to develop tourism. People who attempt to raise the standards of their restaurants and hotels to a higher level to bring in even more money sometimes run into brick walls; officialdom does not offer co-ordinated assistance. Golf-course marketing is not linked either. Packages have not been produced for East Antrim, and that is a tragedy. I therefore appeal to the Minister for some joined-up Government.

Angling, sea fishing, rambling and golf courses have been mentioned, but there are places that offer further tourism potential. The University of Ulster in Jordanstown is upgrading its facilities to make them attractive to visitors not just for conferences or for people attending the centre for sporting excellence, but for people spending their holidays here outside of term time.

Much could be built on, and I hope that the Minister takes on board some of the matters that I have raised and that she lives up to her responsibilities by speaking to her colleagues to ensure that everyone plays their

part in raising tourism levels in East Antrim. Finally, I thank Mr Ross for proposing the motion and for giving me the opportunity to tell Members about the benefits of East Antrim; I will send them a postcard shortly.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I congratulate the Member for securing this Adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity for such discussions at what is an exciting and important time for tourism in Northern Ireland. However, I must add the caveat that the tourism industry is not immune to the major economic challenges faced by everyone. Nevertheless, there is much potential in East Antrim.

I am encouraged by the tourism industry's commitment to address the challenges that exist, and, as the proposer of the motion said, the Northern Ireland Executive, earlier this year, gave their unprecedented commitment to tourism in the form of a £60 million ring-fenced allocation for capital investment, and additional revenue — in excess of £20 million — through the Programme for Government to secure long-term sustainable growth. East Antrim is well positioned to benefit from those projects.

I shall now cover some of the matters that were mentioned in the debate. Mr Hilditch spoke about the Causeway coastal route, which goes through East Antrim and links Belfast and Londonderry. Members will agree that, to date, there has been excellent progress, and more than £10 million has been invested. Key projects include the installation of 400 tourist signs and the commencement of an interpretive programme along the route. Towns and villages along the route will benefit from increased visitor numbers. For example, Island Magee was identified as one of nine routes along the trail that were chosen for their scenic value and their ability to provide visitors with opportunities to explore off the beaten track.

The challenge for local areas is to identify and create opportunities for visitors to spend money, so that those localities can secure economic benefits. We do not just want more visitors; we want them to spend more in Northern Ireland, and we must bear that in mind when considering tourism products.

Belfast and Londonderry — at either end of the route — and the Port of Larne are major gateways to Northern Ireland for tourists arriving by coach and for people on any of the growing number of cruise ships — which Members have mentioned already — that now visit us.

The Antrim coast road was recently described as:

“Arguably the most spectacular 60 miles in Britain.”

Although I will not mention the geography, I will take the compliment. Obviously, it is spectacular, and those

of us who have been lucky enough to travel on that road understand exactly what that quotation says.

Carrickfergus Castle is still very much a gem in East Antrim, and, when I was the Minister of the Environment, I had the pleasure of going there on several occasions, including to an Ulster-Scots event. I also attended a tremendous event at the castle with Belfast City Council, at which Americans from Nashville visited as part of the Sister Cities Initiative.

Carrickfergus Castle continues to be a popular venue for weddings, having had, to date, approximately 36 bookings for civil and religious ceremonies in 2008. The castle is also popular for wedding photographs and remains a popular tourist attraction, with approximately 54,000 tourist visits annually, plus visits by approximately 11,000 schoolchildren.

Conserving the historical fabric of the castle and servicing visits by tourists and school groups will remain the priority of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. It has been recognised that there are tensions between doing that and opening up the castle in the way that Members wish. However, I understand from the Department of the Environment that the agency will investigate the possibility of another body managing evening and weekend events at the castle, because I believe that that is where the difficulties lie for some Members.

As I said, Carrickfergus Castle is a gem in East Antrim, and then there are the spectacular views from the Bla Hole across Whitehead to Scotland. The Sallagh Braes and the glens of Antrim are worth a visit in their own right, and the Giant's Causeway attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors into the area every year and still remains the top tourist attraction in Northern Ireland. However, as Mr Ross said, we do not only want visitors passing through East Antrim, we also want them to stay there, and I agree that Members should be focusing on that.

The East Antrim constituency is blessed with natural beauty and plays a central role in making Northern Ireland an attractive destination. The Causeway coastal route, including East Antrim, features prominently on the consumer websites of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, and the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership.

Although the wider signature project has much to offer visitors, the East Antrim constituency boasts a wealth of smaller but no less worthwhile attractions. Those have all been mentioned by Members and they include: the village of Carnlough; Glenarm, with its castle gardens, forest walks and harbour; Carnfunnock Country Park; the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland in Whitehead, which was mentioned by Mr Neeson; the marine museums; St Nicholas' Church in Carrickfergus; and the White House in Newtownabbey.

I was pleased to visit the White House, although I must say that I have never heard the immortal and pious memory of the glorious King William referred to as the king of the campers before, but I suppose that there is a first time for everything. Members may be aware that the Loyal Orders are proposing the development of a Williamite trail, and my Department is keen to help them with that. I agree that the story relates to a much wider area than Northern Ireland. As I said when I visited the White House; King William landing there is a European story.

As well as those attractions, there are golf courses with some of the most spectacular views imaginable: Whitehead, Cairndhu, and Larne Golf Club, which is on Island Magee.

I believe that it was Mr Ross who mentioned the Lafarge application — I understand that the Minister of the Environment is expecting a planning recommendation for that in early 2009, and I hope that he will be able to implement that as quickly as possible.

Several Members mentioned the Gobbins cliff path restoration and new visitors' centre. Larne Borough Council has approached the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for financial support in the region of £1.2 million for the restoration of the path and the development of the new visitors' centre. I understand that Larne Borough Council has approached several other organisations, and my Department will continue to work with the Tourist Board and Larne Borough Council to develop that, as I consider it to be a very worthwhile project.

Mr Neeson referred to a proposed *son et lumière* event at Carrickfergus Castle. I understand that Carrickfergus Borough Council is having ongoing discussions about that with the Tourist Board; I urge the council to continue those discussions so that a good outcome can be achieved.

I had a strong interest in the issue of the walled towns when I was Minister of the Environment. At that time, I visited Carrickfergus and I recall that Mr Hilditch had invited the Irish Walled Towns Network to meet at Carrickfergus for the first time, so it was a useful occasion. However, I believe that, although the signature project sits in Londonderry with the walls surrounding Derry city, Carrickfergus could make more of its status as a walled town.

7.00 pm

As consumer spending power reduces, competition will intensify between destinations. Therefore — more than ever — we must ensure that a quality experience is given to the consumer. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board will be focusing its efforts on the development of industry programmes to support the sector's ability to compete internationally. It will also support development in four key product areas aligned to:

business tourism — Members may have noticed the recent Business Tourism Expo; cities; culture and heritage; and sports activities and waterways tourism.

There are already some great places to stay in East Antrim, and Members have mentioned particular accommodation. However, that aspect may need to be considered in more detail, and perhaps we will be able to do that — in conjunction with Members — in the near future.

Recently, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board ran a very successful campaign in the Republic of Ireland which encouraged visitors to the island of Ireland to consider a trip to Northern Ireland. The Causeway coastal route in Antrim featured prominently in that campaign, and feedback suggested that visitors were very impressed by what they could see and do when they reached Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland will continue to work together to organise press trips to East Antrim, ensuring that the area remains on the radar. Mention was made in today's debate that both organisations needed to up their game in that area, but they are committed to continuing those press trips with local and international journalists.

East Antrim can offer much towards growing the number of visitors to Northern Ireland, and I look forward very much to working with my Department's various partners to do that. Members have mentioned that the matters under debate do not fall solely under my Department's remit, and that is very true. Those considerations fall under the remit of several other Departments, but DETI takes the lead on tourism. There is good potential to grow the tourism industry in East Antrim, and I hope to welcome many more visitors to the area in the future. I thank the Member for proposing this topic for debate.

Adjourned at 7.02 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 20 October 2008

*The Assembly met at 12 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr Molloy] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Authorities (Reform) Bill

Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 12 December 2008, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 19/07).

The Public Authorities (Reform) Bill passed its Second Stage on 30 June and was referred to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the same day. The Bill seeks to transfer the functions of the Fisheries Conservancy Board to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and to abolish the Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board for Northern Ireland. The Bill also contains a number of repeals of primary legislation relating to organisations that have been abolished, including Enterprise Ulster, the Pig Production Development Committee and Laganside Corporation.

The Bill forms part of the legislative programme to implement the review of public administration. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has considered the Bill on a number of occasions and has agreed to write to the Department requesting an amendment to the Bill. The Committee seeks an extension until 12 December 2008 to allow the Department time to consider the Committee's proposed amendment. I ask Members for their support.

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 12 December 2008, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 19/07).

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report from the Committee for Social Development on the Administration of Disability Living Allowance

Mr Deputy Speaker: Owing to the unavoidable absence of both the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, the Committee has agreed that Miss Michelle McIlveen will move the motion on its behalf. The Speaker is content that the Committee has reached an agreement about the revised arrangement, and the motion may proceed.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours 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, and all other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Social Development on the Administration of Disability Living Allowance and calls on the Department for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

I thank the Speaker for permitting me to propose the motion on behalf of the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

Disability affects the lives of a large number of people in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland survey of people with activity limitations and disabilities from July 2007 found that people in around 18% of households face limitations in their daily living as a consequence of a disability or a long-term condition. Disability living allowance (DLA) is a tax-free, non-means-tested social-security benefit for people under the age of 65 who have an illness or disability and who need help getting around or help with personal care.

DLA was introduced in 1992, in recognition of the fact that existing benefits did not meet the needs of some groups of disabled people. Today, around 170,000 people in Northern Ireland — roughly 10% of the population — receive either the mobility or care component, or both components, of the disability living allowance. The two separate components of DLA — mobility and care — can be assessed on several different levels and can be combined to give 12 possible outcomes. Members will agree that that makes for a complicated system for both claimants and the Department, and the complexity increases further when the self-assessment element of DLA is added.

Faced with limited information on the administration of DLA, the Committee for Social Development produced the report to initiate discussion, highlight concerns and make recommendations for improvement.

The report on the administration of DLA is centred on different areas. I shall deal with information collection first. While reviewing the administration of DLA, the Committee found that the Department could not provide information on the numbers and types of disallowed or unsuccessful applications. The UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) maintains the Department's information system. Apparently, that system cannot be reconfigured for Northern Ireland, and a local database is not maintained. On 1 July 2007, the Appeals Service (Northern Ireland) introduced a computer system that captures such information, and the Committee could obtain information on DLA appeals only from that date.

The Committee believes that accurate data on all applications — successful, unsuccessful, appealed or otherwise — are essential for the appropriate management of DLA. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Department develop a cost-effective information system to collect data on disallowances and unsuccessful applicants who enter the appeals process.

Members should consider the application process. DLA claimants are faced with a lengthy 48-page application form. Although work has been undertaken to improve the form, the Committee believes that that aspect of the application process can be an unnecessary barrier for vulnerable claimants or those with limited literacy and numeracy skills. The Committee recommends that the application form undergo a further revision, given the importance of the forms and the requirement for some claims to be renewed regularly. Widespread consultation should take place with key stakeholders on a revised and simplified DLA application form.

I shall now talk about the decision-making process for DLA applicants. Decision-makers have a difficult task: they must consider the information provided and apply complex rules to arrive at their assessment; and they must work to achieve clearance-time targets. The Committee recommends that the clearance-time target be redefined for those cases in which more detailed and time-consuming evidence is required.

As before, the Committee found it difficult to comment at length on that aspect of the administration of DLA because of the absence of detailed information. The Committee recommends that the Department invests in a cost-effective data-collection system for all evidence sought by decision-makers to allow for proper monitoring and analysis.

In respect of the decision-making process, the Committee has reviewed the role of medical practitioners and recommends that the Department reviews the complexity and level of completion of the GP reports used in DLA assessments. The Committee had further concerns about the reports produced by examining

medical practitioners and whether those reports fairly assessed the impact of a person's disability on his or her mobility or care needs. The Committee, therefore, recommends that a survey be undertaken of all DLA claimants who have undergone a medical examination. Such a survey would establish the level of satisfaction and would inform improvement of that aspect of the service.

Furthermore — and, again, with a view to informing improvement — the Committee recommends that the Department considers the appointment of senior officials with adjudication experience to monitor the accuracy of all DLA decision-making. The Committee was also concerned with apparent anomalies in respect of different periods of awards made to claimants suffering, ostensibly, from the same disabilities. The Committee recommends that the Department reviews those inconsistencies.

The Committee also considered the DLA dispute procedure. A surprisingly large number of applications result in referral to the DLA dispute procedure. The Committee believes that, in some cases, the process can be unnecessarily lengthy. It is recommended that the Department amends procedures to allow reconsidered appeals to be processed in the same time frame as the first appeal. In order to reduce the number of appeals, it is recommended that the Department increases the emphasis on evidence-gathering at the initial stages of claims. Evidence should come from a wider variety of sources, and better use should be made of medical records. It is hoped that that will reduce the number of appeals resolved as a result of the later acceptance of additional evidence.

To further reduce the number of appeals, it is recommended that the Department revises its procedures and requires presenting officers to attend all appeal tribunal hearings. That will ensure that lessons are learnt and fed back. It is hoped that constructive feedback from presenting officers will lead to fewer appeals, less cost for the Department and, ultimately, less anxiety for claimants. To improve confidence and transparency in the appeals process, it is also recommended that the president of the Appeals Service (Northern Ireland) should have sufficient information to allow him oversight of the entire DLA appeals process, including timely information on appeals made.

As I said earlier, DLA is an important benefit for many people in Northern Ireland, and the Committee recognises the difficulties that the Department faces in administering the benefit. It is the Committee's hope that the report's recommendations will be helpful to the Department and will assist in the improvement of the administration of DLA in Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I commend the report to the Assembly. I look forward to hearing the views of Members and the Minister on the Committee's recommendations.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Members are aware, most of the legislation that comes before the Committee for Social Development is parity legislation. If the Committee cannot change the legislation, it can certainly consider the effectiveness of its administration, and that forms the thrust of the report.

As has been stated, DLA is a benefit that was introduced in 1992, and it gives people with disabilities the opportunity to fill out a self-assessment questionnaire when completing the claim forms. In the beginning, that approach worked reasonably well, but as the benefit evolved, the Department's administration of the benefit became more inconsistent and more difficult for claimants to understand.

12.15 pm

I am aware of a case that clearly highlights the inconsistency of the Department's adjudication procedures. DLA was applied for in respect of two children with Down's syndrome — one child was awarded the benefit for two years, and the other was awarded it indefinitely. However, those children have the same condition — one that they have to live with for their entire lives.

The claim form, which has 48 pages and repeats questions, is challenging. The Committee suggests that the maintenance of parity would not be compromised if a different claim form were used. The form could be simplified and yet obtain the same information. It should have a specific mental-health section to enable claimants to explain their problems in detail.

The interpretation of medical evidence must be greatly improved. Favourable GP reports about a patient's suitability for DLA are often ignored, but the Department quotes less informative reports ad nauseam. People here deserve a better service. The Department must take account of the decisions of the Office of the Social Security and Child Support Commissioners in DLA cases. Commissioners decided that the effect that a condition has on a claimant needs to be considered, rather than the cause.

The Committee has made 13 recommendations, one of which is a redefinition of clearance-time targets for cases that require particular types of evidence or further evidence. That would ensure that decisions are both timely and correct. Another recommendation is for the Department to examine whether claimants with similar circumstances are awarded DLA for the same length of time. The Committee recommends that the Department appoint a senior official with adjudication expertise to oversee all departmental decision-making.

The Committee recommends that presenting officers should be present at every appeal tribunal hearing. Indeed, Mr Maclynn, president of the Appeals Service, subpoenaed the Department in an effort to ensure the

attendance of presenting officers. He felt that that would give better definition to the appeals process, but his plan was never implemented. In the area that I represent, the appeals tribunal centre in Newry probably deals with more appeals than any area outside Belfast. However, the Department is represented at about only 36% of those appeals tribunals.

The Committee also recommends that the Department supply the president of the Appeals Service with all relevant information to grant him independent oversight of the entire appeals process. In particular, the president should be supplied with timely information on appeals. Approximately 170,000 people here are in receipt of DLA. Contrary to the bad publicity and innuendo, the Department's figures show that it has the lowest level of fraud. Indeed, fewer than 0.01% of DLA claims are fraudulent.

The report is detailed and comprehensive, and the Committee should be praised for its compilation. The Committee's recommendations can only help to alleviate the problems faced by people applying for DLA, and those already in receipt of the benefit. I ask the Assembly to approve the report. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Committee for Social Development's report. It is a fine piece of work, which I hope the Department and the Minister will welcome as a useful contribution to the administration of disability living allowance in Northern Ireland. The report is well written and thorough, and it contains a number of helpful recommendations.

I hope that some, if not all, of those recommendations can be put to good use by the Department. Disability living allowance is an important aspect of the social-security system in Northern Ireland. It affects 170,000 people — a sizeable part of the population of Northern Ireland — in some way or another.

The Committee's report includes the basic observation that the form is very long, repetitive and unnecessarily complex. The Department should consider that observation carefully. The Committee is wedded to the concept of parity with regard to benefits, not with regard to the administration of the system. I hope that the Department takes on board the idea of reconfiguring the application form and some of its questions so that it meets the local circumstances of people in Northern Ireland. We must be cognisant of, and sensitive to, the reality that some applicants for benefit do not have high literacy skills. It is important to show compassion and an understanding of the difficulties that those people face.

As Michelle McIlveen — who spoke on behalf of the Committee Chairperson — and other Members said, it is important to consider the quality of evidence that is provided to the Department for its decision-

making when processing DLA. Poor-quality evidence will result in poor decision-making. It is as simple as that. The quality of the evidence must be improved, and it must be ensured that the medical evidence that is given is sufficient to meet the needs of the applicant as well as the Department's needs in assessing the applicant's circumstances. It is important that the Department takes that on board also.

I wish to raise the issue of what I call the data gap. There is a serious data failure in relation to DLA, and that must be improved. Data must be collected in order to understand more fully how the system works. That will allow a better system to be put into operation.

It is important that all those points are taken on board. There are anomalies in awards, and that must be addressed. The Department must revisit many aspects of the system. The report is helpful, and I hope that the Department takes it on board.

Ms Lo: I thank the Committee, departmental staff and those who submitted oral and written evidence during the compilation of the report. The report provides a good insight into the challenges of the administration of disability living allowance. Many people — almost one in 10 in Northern Ireland — receive DLA. In 2007-08, on average, 2,000 fresh DLA claims were made each month. On top of that, almost 1,400 renewal applications, 1,000 supersession requests, 800 reconsideration requests and 600 appeal requests were made each month.

By all accounts, that is a large volume of work, which also involves a complicated assessment process that relies on judgment and interpretation of detailed medical evidence, and includes, at times, medical reports or examinations. All in all, the Social Security Agency (SSA) staff do their job effectively, but efforts must be made to achieve excellence and continuous improvement.

The Committee's report provides some learning points for the Department. I support all the recommendations; in particular, those relating to data collection, the self-assessment claim form, gathering evidence at the initial claim stage, and the need for presenting officers to be at all appeal tribunals.

The report criticises the lack of data available to the Committee about unsuccessful applicants and about further evidence collected during the decision-making process. Clearly, the Department must have that information to evaluate and benchmark standards in SSA practices.

The self-assessment form is the size of a book and is not straightforward — it is particularly difficult for people with literacy or mental-health problems. Also, one can imagine how difficult it can be for people whose first language is not English to plough through all those pages. The Department recently promoted a

great strategy aimed at encouraging hard-to-reach groups to claim their rightful benefit entitlements. Therefore, obstacles, such as complicated forms, must not be put in the way of those who are already vulnerable.

Many new claimants also seek help from advice centres in their own communities. Sadly, the voluntary sector faces a serious funding crisis caused by the loss of peace funding, diminishing support from lottery funding, shrinking neighbourhood-renewal support and by the impact of the comprehensive spending review. Many advice-worker posts have gone in those communities, creating problems for people who want help in completing the forms.

Figures in the Committee's report reveal that over the past few years, half of the appeals tribunal decisions went in favour of the appellants. It is right that the report recommends better evidence gathering at the decision-making stage. It will ensure that more comprehensive assessments are made, wrong decisions are avoided, and delays, appeals and unnecessary costs are minimised.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report, 'Decision-Making and Disability Living Allowance', acknowledged that the SSA intended that presenting officers attend 100% of appeals hearings. However, the Committee's report showed that in Belfast in 2006 and 2007, for example, the attendance rate of presenting officers was less than 30%. That is not good enough.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Lo: The benefit of presenting officers attending appeals is clearly stated in the Committee's report, which I urge the Department to consider carefully.

Mr Armstrong: The report's key point can be found in one sentence in the executive summary:

"It is vital that those who are entitled to Disability Living Allowance get the correct award, for the correct period, without any undue delay."

If that is adhered to, the rest is straightforward.

12.30 pm

As has been stated, the report's terms of reference mean that it is solely concerned with the administration of DLA and not with policy issues surrounding uptake and fraud, among other things. There are many genuine concerns about those matters, but they must wait for another day.

Disability living allowance affects some of the most vulnerable people in our society, and it is vital that we strike a balance between creating a system whereby claimants who are entitled to DLA actually receive their entitlements and ensuring that those who are not entitled to receive benefits are prevented from doing so.

Like other MLAs, I have been contacted by many constituents who have been bewildered by the complexities involved in completing the relevant forms. Therefore, I fully support the Committee's recommendations, as they are designed to improve the administrative process and to ensure that it is made less confusing for claimants. That should help to alleviate the current situation whereby £190 million in DLA is underpaid in the United Kingdom. That is money to which people are entitled, and it should make a real difference to the lives of vulnerable people and their families.

I am mindful of the fact that Northern Ireland has a higher ratio of people claiming DLA than the rest of the United Kingdom. There may be sound reasons for that, but the Department has a duty to investigate the matter and to find out why that is the case and what can be done about it.

In October 2007, it was announced that the number of people claiming DLA in Northern Ireland was increasing by 1,000 per month, and it had reached a record high of 174,343 claimants, which amounts to more than 10% of the population. The most common reasons for claiming were arthritis, which accounted for more than 30,000 claims, and heart disease, which accounted for more than 11,000 claims.

There are very real public-health implications and challenges arising from such figures, and those must be recognised by the Health Minister's commitment to the public-health agenda. If we work together — and, in many cases, that means people taking personal responsibility for their health and well-being by stopping smoking and by eating and drinking sensibly — we should be able to improve the nation's health, have a better quality of life and reduce the number of people who require DLA. That will benefit people's health, and it will also benefit taxpayers.

Mr Craig: I commend the report from the Committee for Social Development on the administration of disability living allowance.

The allowance was introduced in 1992 to incorporate both attendance and mobility allowances, in recognition that the needs of some groups were not being met. Famously — or, indeed, infamously — it also introduced the self-assessment form to allow more detailed individual description of claimants' disabilities. The intention was to ensure that individuals with disabilities receive the help that they deserve. However, 16 years later, disability living allowance is causing consternation not only to our constituents but to Members who, in many instances, support individuals who have been let down by the system.

When one considers the administration of the allowance, some startling — if not obvious — issues come to light. First, no data was being collected on the

numbers of unsuccessful claimants who entered the appeals process, so we are all left wondering about the accuracy of the system. If one was a sceptic, one could almost jump to the conclusion that that had been done deliberately. Secondly, the claim form is 48-pages long, and it repeatedly requests the same information. It is a form that would tax a university professor, never mind the most vulnerable in our society who are meant to fill it out. Again, if one was being sceptical, one would wonder why the form is so complex.

During the decision-making process, civil servants must apply complex rules and laws to the whole application form. That forces them into further consultation with the applicants, their GPs and other agencies — even the agency's medical practitioners. The process goes on and on. When one considers the application form and the consultation that has to take place, it is surprising that anyone actually arrives at a decision.

Furthermore, taking into account the complexity of the decision-making process, it is not hard to see how civil servants come under huge pressure to meet target times, and how, perhaps, they do not find the right time balance when it comes to the necessary consultation with the experts.

All of those factors lead to a high level of dissatisfaction, which, unfortunately, is not being monitored but needs to be monitored in order to reflect how good or bad the administration of the system really is. There are also major issues around the time taken to reassess disability cases. It is significant that we are approaching the end of the three-year disability and carers' strategy. The Department must examine the issue closely, because no one in the Committee wants to go back to the random selection process that was in place previously.

Another issue that stands out is the plight of applicants who are turned down and who, sometimes, have to go through a lengthy review of their cases. If they enter into an appeals process, they suddenly find themselves at the back of an ever-lengthening queue. Everyone agrees that that is unacceptable, and that it must be examined. A system that keeps applicants in the existing queue must be developed, because people who apply for DLA are at their most vulnerable when they enter the process. They are under extreme stress, not only with regard to their health, but with regard to their ability to pay. That must be readdressed.

Given the failings that I have outlined, I support the Committee's report and I hope that its recommendations will be implemented.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad of the opportunity to speak at the launch of the report today. It is crucial that the Assembly is seen to be acting in support of the report's

recommendations. It is even more important that the Minister for Social Development takes on board, and acts on, the need for change in the administration of disability living allowance.

I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that the 13 recommendations contained in the report will make it easier for people to access a benefit, which, for many, can offer the necessary lifeline to deal with the problems that they face in everyday life.

Disability living allowance was introduced in 1992 to replace attendance allowance and mobility allowance, which, it was felt, did not meet the needs of disabled people with learning disability or visual impairment.

The self-assessment claim form for DLA was supposed to make it easier for people to apply for the benefit and simplify its administration. It is now accepted by many in the advice and medical fields that the form is complicated, and that it poses great difficulties for people with literacy difficulties or mental-health problems. People have told me that they believe that the form is a minefield, and that it is deliberately designed to put them off applying for DLA.

The administration process has also been a nightmare for people because of its lengthy delays and contradictory decisions. I was presented with an example of that nightmare recently. Two families from the same area, and in almost exactly similar circumstances, applied for DLA but received different awards. That left them feeling confused and angry, as no explanation was given for the disparity.

DLA is meant to assist people who are not in a position to help themselves, and to provide financial respite for carers that can make their lives, and those of their loved ones, a little bit easier. We must ensure that that, and not the opposite, happens. In many ways, the origins of the report lie in the evidence-based sessions that were held by the Committee for Social Development in the Long Gallery. During one session, Committee members met several sets of parents who told harrowing stories of their interaction with the system of administration of DLA.

I commend all those carers who daily provide the loving attention that their loved ones require. No amount of resources can replace the love and commitment that is needed to provide the help that is demanded in such circumstances. I also commend the officers and members of the Committee for Social Development for their determination to publish the report. I know that it has been difficult for them to piece together the different parts of the jigsaw that constitute the report. I particularly commend my colleague Mickey Brady, whose lifetime knowledge and experience in the advice sector allowed him to ask the crucial questions at a key point in the inquiry.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, a broad wealth of experience is available to the Minister and the Department, of which they should avail themselves when considering the recommendations. The ethos of disability living allowance is to allow people to cope with the problems that they face from a debilitating illness or to receive the care and attention that is required to live some kind of normal life. It is incumbent on all Members to ensure that the report does not sit gathering dust. We must ensure that the recommendations are not only taken on board but implemented. The Assembly must ensure that people have confidence in the benefits system; that can be done only when there is transparency and clarity.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I have followed the debate with interest, and, like most Members, I agree with the thrust of the report and the principle behind it — to ensure that the right benefit goes to the right person at the right time. It is important that that principle is maintained when it comes to the expenditure of public resources. However, it is also important to identify — as the Committee for Social Development has quite rightly done — the problems that Members, and, indeed, the public, have encountered in the administration of disability living allowance. Those problems stem from differing interpretations of the same policy. To get those interpretations right seems to be a minefield. I hope that the Department can give straightforward advice to departmental officials to ensure that the same interpretation is always given so that the confusion that has been identified by many Members is completely eradicated.

I agree with what Members have said about the form-filling process. If people arrive at my constituency office with an application form for disability living allowance, they have to make a separate appointment and at least an hour and a half is set aside in order to assist them with filling out that application. That demonstrates the incredible complexity of the questions asked on the application form and the entire procedure.

I will focus on three of the report's recommendations. Recommendation 8 identifies the issue of misinterpretation of policy. Most Members will have personal experiences of cases when a GP has given them specific evidence and an independent medical adviser has given completely different evidence, yet the finding is the same, in that the applicant usually does not obtain the benefit in question. In most cases, the balance appears to be that the Department agrees with the findings of the independent medical practitioner rather than those of the local GP. However, I believe that a local GP understands a claimant considerably better than does an independent practitioner who examines that claimant for a few

moments and then makes an assessment of his or her ability to work. That matter must be considered urgently.

In my experience, the fact that a person goes through the arduous process of making an application, with all the trauma that that involves, and then takes the further step of going through a tribunal process if his or her initial claim is turned down, indicates that that person is genuine and wants to follow the correct process to claim an entitlement. Such people are made to feel that they are being called liars because of statements that they have made on their application form, which is harrowing and must be addressed.

Recommendation 6 states that the Department should carry out:

“a survey of all Disability Living Allowance claimants who have undergone a medical assessment, to seek their views and establish a level of satisfaction.”

A medical practitioner simply conducting a further assessment or survey of what the applicant feels has happened is not the way forward.

12.45 pm

It is important that an independent medical practitioner surveys that work, because applicants are usually not aware how important it is to provide the practitioner with all the facts and evidence regarding their claims. On many occasions, a medical practitioner will call with an applicant for a quick meeting, without the applicant realising how critical that first assessment is to their overall hearing. Applicants must be made aware of the critical importance of that first meeting. If that meeting goes wrong, claimants face an uphill struggle in trying to obtain a benefit to which, in many instances, they are fully entitled. Further work must be done to address that, and some serious training must be provided.

In recommendation 12, the Committee recommends that presenting officers be present at every appeal tribunal hearing. The stats appear to show that presenting officers are present for about only one third of all cases. Presenting officers should attend tribunals to make the case as to why a person is not receiving benefit. However, there will be huge costs and, ultimately a delay to appellants' claims, if we are to wait for a presenting officer to attend every time. That issue must be examined quickly.

Mr Cobain: Like other Members, I thank the Committee for its report. I join with other Members to call on the Minister to implement the report's recommendations as quickly as possible.

People who qualify for disability living allowance have severe physical and mental disabilities. It is of paramount importance that we have an excellent administration and adjudication process in place to

ensure that those people receive their claims in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Unfortunately, many claimants do not get their correct benefit entitlements immediately. It should also be recognised that 50% of people who receive disability living allowance are, in fact, in employment. In Northern Ireland, false disability living allowance claims are a reality. We must put in place a system that ensures that those people who need help receive it efficiently and those people who are not entitled to benefits are removed from the system.

The administration of application and adjudication processes is vital in attempting to deliver a fair system for all. As Mr Paisley Jnr said, the process of applying for disability living allowance is long, complex and comes in several parts. It can take a considerable time to complete the forms and to provide the correct information. People practically need a degree to complete the applications for disability living allowance. It is vitally important that people provide the most relevant and useful information in support of their claim, and that that is handled in the most efficient and appropriate way.

Members are aware that disability living allowance can be a claimant's passport to receiving other benefits and, on occasion, to increasing the amounts of pension credits, housing benefits and rate relief already received. Therefore, it is important that claims be handled and utilised properly.

In today's financial climate of rising energy prices and increasing consumer costs, it is crucial that we help those people who are most vulnerable in society to obtain the benefits to which they are entitled. Additionally, it is crucial that that money not be misappropriated. The Committee discovered that in any modern Government Department, or even any business, adequate monitoring and analysis of inputs and data collected must be improved in order to inform any future strategic decision-making process. That is a crucial first step in improving the service. Unfortunately, the Committee was impeded in its consideration of the accuracy of the decision-making on claims, because there was a considerable lack of relevant and reliable data on the administration process.

Receiving disability living allowance can have an extremely beneficial impact on people's lives. On many occasions, the Minister for Social Development has said that it is important that people claim all the benefits to which they are entitled as a passport out of poverty.

Additionally, benefits should not go to those who do not qualify for them, because that costs everyone in society — people must understand that. Therefore, the Committee has recommended that the Department implements a robust, efficient and effective system to collect data on unsuccessful applicants and

disallowances in the disputes process. It is also critically important that the information that the Department receives allows it to assess not only claimants' medical diagnoses, but the effect that they have on the level of care that they require, their mobility and their ability to engage with the world around them.

The self-assessment claim form was intended to allow claimants to describe, in their own words, how their disability affects their daily lives. However, the Committee was concerned that, because the form is so complex and repetitive, it is almost impossible for some claimants — and some MLAs — to complete, which could deter them from claiming altogether. We must address that issue as quickly as possible.

The Committee acknowledges the concerns that GPs expressed about their ability to give information on the functional needs of patients and describe the effect of patients' symptoms on their care and mobility, which is a key issue for disability living allowance. The Committee recommends that the Department consider the issue of GP reports, including standards of completion, relevance of questions, the amount of reliance placed on those reports by decision-makers, and the fee paid for completion.

The Committee was not wholly convinced that there was consistency in the way in which claimants with similar needs are treated with respect to periods of awards. It was also concerned that the Northern Ireland Standards Committee has limited adjudication expertise.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join other Members in paying tribute to the work of the Committee staff, particularly the Committee Clerk, in their preparation of the report. As Fra McCann said, the Committee also benefited from the experience that Mickey Brady brought from his previous employment.

Anna Lo mentioned the statistic that two in five households across the North contain one person with limited mobility or a disability. We must examine the causes of ill health and lack of mobility, which include poverty and the impact of the conflict. Although it is widely accepted that poverty and ill health are interlinked, not all people who receive DLA are poor or deprived.

As Members have said, the first purpose of the report is to open discussions, which must be welcomed. As all Members will know from their constituencies, the application process for DLA has been a harrowing experience for many people. As Jonathan Craig outlined, if a claimant has an application turned down and goes through an appeals process, he or she must go to the end of another queue. By and large, those claimants are in pain and are under pressure physically and

financially. That is one of the most unfair ways to deal with the most vulnerable people in our communities.

The decision-making process requires attention. The computer system that Members mentioned does not hold data on those who were not successful in their applications. Therefore, the Department does not have a true picture or analysis of those who were refused DLA. That problem is cited in the recommendations and must be considered.

There are 13 recommendations, which are clear — there are no recommendations in the report to which anyone would take exception. The report is an opportunity for the Committee and the Department to devise measures that benefit people in need. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on that. The problems in the administration of DLA can be addressed quickly, and the benefits could be instant if all the recommendations in the report, and more, were adopted.

In my previous role as health spokesperson for Sinn Féin, a common complaint that I heard from GPs was the role of their reports in the decision-making process on DLA applications. As Mickey Brady pointed out, the more detail that is provided on a patient's condition, the less likely it is that their claim will be successful.

One imagines that the reverse would be the case. GPs feel frustrated, because they can explain in clinical and sometimes detailed terms what a person is going through; however, there is little room to describe how someone's mobility is affected, which is a key factor in making a decision on mobility and care.

In my constituency, one aspect that disturbed me was the role of some of the medical examiners and practitioners who visit people in their homes. Ian Paisley Jnr is 100% right in what he said. People, particularly older people, open the door, offer tea and make a fuss of their visitors. That is like old people years ago who cleaned the house because the home help was coming. It is their cultural background, and they do not realise that being able to go and put on the kettle may limit them from receiving a benefit to which they are entitled.

More than that — and, possibly, worse — people with chronic depression, whose mobility is severely disrupted, and who, genuinely, should be in receipt of the benefit, were told to give themselves a shake. If a medical examiner does not have the wherewithal, compassion or empathy to understand a condition that may qualify for award, that is disturbing. Given the high level of mental-health illnesses, for all sorts of reasons, I urge that the report and recommendations be accepted, and ask Members for their support. Go raibh mile maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I welcome the work undertaken by the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Social Development, and the submission made by Miss McIlveen on the Committee's behalf. The report manages to be concise and comprehensive in those areas on which it is focused, and contains a number of detailed recommendations. I commend the Committee and recognise its hard work in bringing forward the report.

At a time when all politicians are being criticised in the context of the DUP-Sinn Féin stalemate and logjam in the Executive, it is worth letting the public know — and particularly worth reminding the media — that a lot of good work goes on in this place. I know, too, how much work the DSD Committee put into the Charities Bill, and other legislation that I brought forward to the Committee. The popular jibe about all those politicians up there on the hill doing nothing, is, therefore, inaccurate and unfair. I gently suggest to the media that they could do more to challenge such a perception, rather than feed it.

I am sure that all Members, and the Committee, will appreciate that I have had insufficient time in which to do justice to the report's recommendations by giving them the careful consideration that they merit. I do not intend, therefore, to respond in detail to all the specifics in the report, but I will give it the consideration that it deserves and respond to the Committee in due course.

Nevertheless, I want to say a few words on the issues that are raised in the report. Members understand my view on welfare entitlement: I am determined that every person who is entitled to support under the welfare system should receive all the support to which they are entitled. That is, perhaps, particularly so in the case of disability living allowance, where decisions on entitlement impact on vulnerable people. That is why I welcome the opportunity to debate the way forward on the administration of disability living allowance.

I agree that it is vital that those who are responsible for the administration of the process get things right. Mindful of that, I have set challenging public service agreement targets for disability living allowance in respect of financial accuracy and claims clearance times. It is also important to give credit where credit is due.

Let me quote from the recent Public Accounts Committee's report 'Social Security Benefit Fraud and Error':

"The benefit system is inherently complex and the Committee recognises the good work being done by Agency staff in delivering services to customers, often under difficult and pressurised circumstances."

It is also worth noting that the level of fraud and error is down substantially from previous years and

compares favourably with that of other institutions that release money into the public domain.

1.00 pm

The Public Accounts Committee is absolutely correct in recognising the complexity of the disability-living-allowance process; a factor that has been recognised by all Members who spoke in the debate. That complexity has been recognised by other independent commentators and the Committee's report acknowledges that very issue. That complexity is, perhaps, best illustrated when Members consider that there are 13 possible outcome decisions on every single claim, which is unique in the benefit system. Decisions can range from awards of both components at the higher rate, which is around £113.75 each week, to a refusal of benefit. Each outcome carries the same appeal rights.

The system's complexity is not cause for complacency. It calls for action. Against that backdrop, my Department has taken significant steps forward in the administration of disability living allowance with particular emphasis on delivering improvements in the quality of work.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister talks about the system's complexity and its resultant anomalies. I want to bring to her attention the fact that the Royal National Institute of Blind People calls for partially sighted people to be awarded DLA at the higher level of mobility. Is the Minister aware of that? What action will her Department take on the matter?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Maginness for his intervention. I am well aware of the lobby campaign by the Royal National Institute of Blind People. In fact, I will meet the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in November 2008. I will raise that very issue among other benefits matters and discuss how they impact — in some cases, detrimentally — on the people of Northern Ireland.

I will return to the issue about which I was speaking, with particular reference to the system's complexities and the need to deliver improvements in the quality of work. The indicator that is used to measure financial accuracy is now 98.8%. That is an improvement of 5.3% since March 2005. At the same time, it is equally important that people's claims are processed promptly. There has also been an enormous advance in that area with claims now being processed within eight weeks, compared with 15 weeks in 2003, which is a 50% improvement. It is also worth noting that at the outset, the DLA system experienced difficulty. That was recognised in a report that was produced by the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster in 1998. I understand that significant improvements have been made since then.

The disability living allowance team underpins all that work. It delivers over 60,000 transactions and responds to almost a quarter of a million phone calls each year. In such a scenario, some things will go wrong. However, by and large, the team delivers well and gets things right.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am the first person to acknowledge that the complexity of the DLA system is a matter that officials must wrestle with. They do so well in most circumstances. Anyone who has been through the system and has seen how it works understands those complexities.

However, a number of those complexities could be set aside, almost automatically, if DLA were regulated by way of medical conditions. For example, blindness, epilepsy or ME could automatically attract one or both of the components of DLA. That would save officials from having to trawl through a complex application, and, indeed, save the applicant from having to go through that process, or an appeal process.

The Minister for Social Development: I will reflect upon the Member's submission and come back to him directly.

Criticism is often made of the length and complexity of the disability living allowance claim form, and I cannot extract myself from that. As an MLA in South Down, I am very conscious of the complexity of the DLA application form and the difficulties that many people encounter when trying to complete it. That is why there are a range of services out there through the advice service network and, of course, constituency offices. As the Member for North Antrim Mr Paisley Jnr said, considerable time has to be set aside to assist people in understanding the type of information that they should be providing in relation to their medical condition, and how that impacts on their ability to carry out certain functions.

I fully understand and share the concerns raised by all Members. The current layout of the form is designed to capture the information necessary to determine the appropriate entitlement in accordance with the existing legislative rules. Nevertheless, my Department, in conjunction with our colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, keeps that claim form under continual review. In recent years, significant improvements have been made that make it easier to complete. The form now follows a logical flow and tries to free people from having to read and complete unnecessary questions. Some questions have been removed or combined to reduce repetition for the applicant, and there are more tick-box answers to simplify completion and to get more relevant information as early as possible in the claims process. The current claim form has received a crystal mark from the Plain English Campaign.

Nonetheless, I will be very happy to receive suggestions from members of the Social Development Committee, and other Members, on how that paperwork might be further improved without losing its utility. One of the reasons for that is that the vast majority of applicants find themselves in very difficult circumstances. I agree with Members: not only do applicants have to contend with and endure their disability, but they may have family members in the same household with a disability, similar or otherwise. I like to think that my officials, and all those involved in the process, are compassionate and show support to people.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that for those people who are disallowed and decide to make an appeal, the tribunal itself is often a very harrowing experience? Will she re-examine, in so far as she can, the dreadful experience that people have to go through at a tribunal, which very often ends in tears and the inability to continue?

The Minister for Social Development: I am fully aware of the appeals process, having participated in appeals tribunals myself before becoming Minister. I know how harrowing they are, not only for the applicant, but, maybe, for the representative. Notwithstanding that, appeals are not a matter for my Department or me; that clearly lies with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, because they hold the ministerial responsibility for the appeals service. I have taken the matter up with them before, and will do so again.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I have little time, but I will do so for my colleague.

Mr McGlone: Thank you very much, Minister. Despite some improvement, people still find the disability living allowance application form very complex. The Minister and other Members will have shared that experience, having filled in many forms on behalf of people.

The tribunal and appeals services can be complicated, but that is often due to the personalities involved as opposed to any deficiency in their training. On a positive note, I recognise some of the officials who are here today, and I thank them, in particular for their customer service. Despite the delays and difficulties that some applicants experience, on contacting individuals in customer services, some of whom are here today, any problems are dealt with speedily and efficiently.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr McGlone for his intervention, and I will ensure that his good wishes and thanks are passed on to the officials concerned.

I recognise that the claim form can be daunting and off-putting for some people and, therefore, assistance with the completion of claim forms is available at local social security jobs and benefits offices, or by phone from the disability and carers services. Alongside that, the voluntary advice sector in Northern Ireland provides a similar claim form completion service. I am aware that the forms are long and complex, but I am heartened that Professor Eileen Evason, a well-known commentator on social security matters, recently remarked that people in Northern Ireland get more help with completing forms than those in Britain.

I assure Members that my officials proactively consult citizens advice bureaux, Advice NI, the Law Centre and Disability Action, and they, based on their knowledge of users' experience, help to simplify the application process. That approach provides a gateway for key client groups, such as the disabled, to influence the design and content not only of the disability living allowance claim form but of current processes and new initiatives.

Recently, I visited the disability and carers service, which administers DLA. I was highly impressed by the technology of document imaging and electronic workflow management that is used to process claims. That IT system is unique in the delivery of social security benefits in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, and it has streamlined the claims process for disability living allowance. I was also impressed by the attitude of staff and management who take pride in making a difference and helping those who are genuinely entitled to the benefit. It is a great tribute to them that the results are as good as they are, and I encourage the Committee to accept the standing invitation to visit the disability and carers service to see, at first hand, the administration of disability living allowance.

I note the Committee's concerns about the decision-making and evidence-gathering process. Decisions on entitlement involve a high degree of judgement and the interpretation of detailed medical evidence. To facilitate that, decision-makers are specifically trained on a comprehensive 12-week programme. That training is enhanced by the provision of medical education awareness seminars, given by experienced medical professionals, on complex disabilities, such as autism, fibromyalgia and cancer. Full-time medical officers are also on site to provide assistance to decision-makers on any medical issues that arise during the processing of claims.

To further support decision-makers, the detailed medical guidance on a wide spectrum of disabilities that is available online helps to identify the most appropriate source of evidence. Further evidence is obtained from a wide range of sources, such as general practitioners, examining medical practitioners and

other healthcare professionals and, in cases involving children, reports from schools.

I take seriously my responsibility to ensure that those who are entitled to the benefit receive it. In simple terms, disability living allowance is a benefit paid to meet the additional costs associated with severe disabilities. Many people must endure their disabilities alone, without the support of family, and that can be an extremely difficult, onerous and lonely life. Entitlement is based on individual need rather than on the disability. People with the same disability may have different needs and are, consequently, entitled to different rates of benefit.

Several Members mentioned anomalies in disability living allowance. Mickey Brady outlined the case of two children with Down's syndrome. He should refer any specific details about that case to me, so that a further investigation might take place.

1.15 pm

Members referred to "almost" the same circumstances. It is rare that a disability will impact on people in exactly the same way. Benefit entitlement is based on individual need and not paid by disability. Furthermore, Members should be aware that periods of award are subject to accuracy monitoring.

Over the past five years, service delivery has improved, and a step change has occurred. However, I assure Members that my officials and I will not become complacent. I welcome the debate, and the Committee for Social Development's constructive contribution to it. I will write to individual Members who have raised issues, and I will issue a formal response to the Committee in due course. I look forward to considering, in detail, the feasibility, financial costs and operational implications of the recommendations, in order to facilitate further improvements to the administration of disability living allowance.

Miss McIlveen: I am grateful for Members' comments and for their participation in what has been a frank debate. Many Members have first-hand experience of helping constituents to complete DLA application forms and of supporting constituents during the appeals process. We have all experienced similar problems, and it is evident that issues must be addressed. I thank the Minister for attending the debate and for her positive comments.

Disability affects a large number of people in Northern Ireland. Therefore, whether they are eligible for DLA — an important benefit — can have a huge impact on their lives. As the Minister stated, the Committee for Social Development is very busy, but it is committed to improving the administration of DLA. In order to facilitate that improvement, the report has made a number of recommendations, which have been debated.

As Mr Brady correctly stated, the Committee cannot readily change parity legislation, and it does not propose to do so. The report aims to improve administration of DLA and to achieve excellence in that process. As the Minister said, Mr Brady expressed concerns about inconsistencies in the adjudication system and cited the example of two children with Down's syndrome. Furthermore, he highlighted the necessity of using presiding officers.

Mr Maginness stated the importance of presenting quality evidence to the decision-maker to ensure that it reflects applicants' circumstances. He highlighted, as did Ms Lo, Mr Craig, Mr Paisley Jnr and others, the need for a new and simpler application form that can meet community needs. Mr Maginness indicated that such a change would not signify a break with parity.

Ms Lo, rightly, commended the SSA. The report was not intended to criticise its staff; rather, its intention was to highlight the challenges that they face. She outlined the importance of reaching hard-to-reach groups against the backdrop of reducing funding for neighbourhood renewal, peace projects, and so on.

Mr Armstrong referred to the high number of DLA claimants in Northern Ireland and offered suggestions on how personal actions can reduce the burden placed on the state by benefits such as DLA.

Mr Craig outlined the difficulties that the complex, bureaucratic process causes for claimants and staff. He remarked on the absence of satisfaction-monitoring and warned of the adverse impact of random reassessment of DLA cases when the disability and carers strategy ends.

Fra McCann highlighted the injustice of inconsistent judgements and commented on the absence of information. Moreover, he outlined the importance of the role of carers and indicated that DLA administration must be improved in order to reduce pressure on those individuals. All Members will have experienced that issue in their constituencies.

Mr Paisley Jnr highlighted the difficulties of interpreting medical evidence — a concern that we heard throughout today's debate. He also recommended that an independent medical advisor should be appointed to help and to provide advice to claimants. Mr Cobain — who is no longer in the Chamber — suggested that DLA can play a positive role by lifting claimants out of poverty. He also highlighted the importance of considering the impact that DLA has on the mobility and care needs of claimants.

Ms Ní Chuilín raised concerns about the use of GP reports in DLA assessments and about examining practitioners.

I now turn to the comments that were made by the Minister, and I thank her for those, particularly as she commended the Committee for its work on the report and on the volume of work that it undertook over the past year. I welcome the fact that she said that she will respond to our report, and I look forward to a very positive outcome.

The Committee welcomes the Minister's remarks in relation to tough public service agreement targets on accuracy for DLA and other benefits. It is telling that the Minister has personal experience of the system's difficulties, and she said that she will strive to make it better, so that some of the current complexities are avoided. The Minister also asserted that the Department is not complacent; we hope that that is the case.

We appreciate that the Department has been reviewing the application form, but further improvement is required. The Committee might accept the Minister's invitation be involved in a further review of the claim form. We welcome the Minister's acceptance that individuals find tribunals harrowing, and we are interested to learn of the additional efforts that are being made in Northern Ireland to help claimants to complete the forms and, thereby, avoid going before those tribunals. The Committee will be pleased to consider the Minister's invitation to review the improved IT systems that will streamline DLA claims.

On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I thank all Members who contributed to this important debate. In producing the report, I assure the House that it was the Committee's intention to provide helpful direction to the Department concerning the improvement of the administration of disability living allowance. I trust that the Minister will, therefore, take proper account of the Committee's recommendations, and I look forward to receiving a detailed response from her in relation to the ways in which the Committee's recommendations will be addressed. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Social Development on the Administration of Disability Living Allowance and calls on the Department for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Strategy to Promote Safety in Communities

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. 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.

Mr Adams: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for an inter-departmental, multi-disciplinary strategy, informed by the Patten report and the Criminal Justice Review report 2000, to include proposals on alcohol-related crime and prolific offenders, aimed at reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities, to be led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Maith thú, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin, nó creidim gur ábhar an-tábhachtach é seo. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil cruinniú agam leis an Aire Gregory Campbell i rith na díospóireachta, agus mar sin go mbeidh orm imeacht roimh dheireadh na díospóireachta. Ba mhaith liom a rá anois go bhfuil brón orm faoi sin.

I have a meeting this afternoon with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Gregory Campbell, and it might coincide with this debate, so excuse me if that is the case, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I wish to deal with the amendment from the Member for East Belfast Ms Purvis. The motion is about an interdepartmental, multidisciplinary strategy. The amendment provides some detail of that strategy, but it is not at variance with the motion. In order to achieve consensus on the issue, and because I agree with the thrust of the amendment, I tried to propose a composite motion that included some of the amendment's content.

However, by the time that I saw that amendment, we had missed the deadline. Therefore, I ask the Assembly to support the motion, rather than the amendment, if only because the motion deals with the Criminal Justice Review 2000, and I have explained that to the Member who proposed the amendment.

We all recognise the fact that community safety is one of the most important and pressing matters that our society faces. There are problems with antisocial and criminal behaviour, assaults on young women, car hijackings by thugs, elderly people being terrorised in their homes, citizens being badly beaten — some to death — and citizens being stabbed or murdered.

Every citizen has a right to a safe environment, and the Assembly has an obligation to create such an environment. Ach, a LeasCheann Comhairle, níl muid a dhéanamh sin. However, we are failing to create such an environment.

We have the potential and the ability to legislate better and more effectively on such matters than any British direct rule Minister. Moreover, we have the right to do so, and I believe that the confidence exists among the public for us to do so.

Next Monday, the NIO will publish a community safety strategy for consultation, yet, today, we are discussing the need for a community safety strategy. An agency that is outside the Assembly's scrutiny and influence will produce a strategy that no Member will have seen. It is not as though the political parties here do not have opinions about community safety. Quite rightly, all parties have an opinion and, quite rightly, they made those opinions and ideas known to the Independent Commission on Policing, which emerged as a consequence of the Good Friday Agreement.

The 'Criminal Justice Review Implementation Plan' of November 2001 discussed community safety, stating:

"On devolution, we recommend that the Community Safety Unit be located within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister ... steps should be taken through central machinery to ensure that community safety is addressed on a co-ordinated, inter-departmental basis."

During negotiations to amend policing legislation, Sinn Féin successfully persuaded the British Government to ensure that policing in the community is a statutory requirement for all police officers. In addition, the Patten Report envisaged that district policing partnerships (DPPs) would exercise responsibility for community safety. Currently, DPPs do not have the opportunity to direct such resources. Instead, interim arrangements have been made for community safety partnerships, and a budget has been allocated for that by the NIO.

Interestingly, Criminal Justice Inspection (CJINI) examined those arrangements and found them to be ineffective. Therefore, this is not just a matter of institutional reform. The Assembly must concern itself with putting arrangements in place to promote community safety. Is it doing what the public expects or requires of it?

For example, there is widespread concern about the link between alcohol use and crime against the person. In addition, drinking in public places is a major issue, and that is compounded by the fact that the regulation of drinking in public places is primarily a local government matter. The PSNI says that it cannot arrest people for breaking the relevant by-laws. Instead, it refers any breaches to local councils for further action, and it is up

to the councils to bring such matters before the courts. Is rud millteanach amaideach é; níl ciall ar bith ann.

If Members have any sense of what goes on at district policing partnership meetings, it is apparent that people from local communities want the problem to be effectively tackled. In public parks, public places and play spaces, every citizen should be able to relax and enjoy themselves in safety. In addition, there is a problem with the sale of alcohol to underage people and with prolific offenders who repeatedly harm others. Yet, at this time, no Member can bring forward legislation to deal with such matters, and many local communities are distraught at the inability of the criminal justice system and statutory bodies to contend with prolific offenders. Many communities also feel that there are inconsistencies in the application of police and court bail.

1.30 pm

The introduction of legislation is crucial to tackling those matters. However, some important steps can be taken now. One such example is the intervention project in the upper Springfield area of West Belfast. That project has led to the creation of an upper Springfield safer neighbourhood forum — an idea that has been extended to all parts of West Belfast, including the Shankill area. Such schemes represent a new type of partnership between local communities and the statutory sector, and can be developed further.

For decades, some of those local communities have developed and promoted policies to eradicate poverty and to deal with poor health, low educational achievement, and the lack of community resources. That work is ongoing, because crime — particularly antisocial behaviour — does not occur in a vacuum. Some such young people feel alienated and have low self-esteem; some have parenting and other family difficulties; most are unemployed; and I believe that 50% of young people who are currently detained are from an institutional-care background.

We have a duty to examine and correct those dimensions of the problem. Social justice and the rights of citizens demand that. It also makes good sense in the battle against crime. I appreciate the efforts of those involved in that pioneering work, and I foresee many possibilities emerging from those engagements.

I commend community programmes such as community restorative justice and Greater Shankill Alternatives, which have already broken new ground in their field. There are other schemes, such as community courts, which are in use in Liverpool, that could have a role to play here, as could some of the innovative ideas emerging from the joint-policing committees in Dublin and elsewhere throughout the island.

Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly. This is an opportune time for the development of an

interdepartmental multidisciplinary strategy aimed at reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities. Even if we had a justice Department, the cross-departmental and multi-agency focus required by such a strategy could best be taken forward through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Tá seanfhocal ann ó thaobh an ábhair seo: ceart dom, ceart duit. Caithfimid a bheith ábalta pobal sábháilte a chruthú, agus creidim go dtiocfaidh linn féin sin a dhéanamh. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Ms Purvis: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“recognises that offending and anti-social behaviour is often the result of unmet, complex social, educational and health needs; and calls for an inter-departmental, cross-sectional strategy, led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, that ensures safer communities by addressing issues of poverty, poor health, low educational achievement and lack of community and public resources.”

The issues of community safety and antisocial behaviour have been recurring themes in the business of the Assembly. Despite extensive debate and police reports of Northern Ireland crime levels as among the lowest in the UK and of declining incidents of alcohol-related crime, such issues remain dominant topics on the radio, and in our newspapers and constituency offices. Therefore, we are clearly not doing enough to fully understand and address those issues.

When I first read the motion, I had mixed reactions. On the one hand, I agree with the proposers that reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities is a critical issue. I see and hear that every day from constituents who are worried about perceived rising rates of crime and what they see as a deterioration of behaviour among some of our young people.

I also agree that further action on alcohol-related crime is necessary. We know that alcohol use among young people is disturbingly on the rise and that it is often a factor in incidents of abuse and disruptive behaviour.

The issue of prolific offenders also deserves specific consideration. Often, one or two individuals are regularly involved in problematic behaviour and serve as ringleaders — encouraging others to join in.

Those are, undoubtedly, complex problems that will be effectively addressed only by an interdepartmental, multidisciplinary strategy. The Assembly has recognised consistently that many of the challenges that we face must be approached with a comprehensive perspective that takes full account of the entire picture and involves all relevant stakeholders and Departments.

Societal problems do not present themselves so conveniently that they fit neatly into one ministerial

portfolio and one budget. I, therefore, agree with the element of the motion that states that an interdepartmental, cross-sectoral strategy, led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, is necessary to deal with the complex issues affecting community security. However, I do not agree with the manner in which the motion recommends that such problems will be approached. To invoke the Patten Report and the report of the Criminal Justice Review assumes that it is best to approach problematic behaviour punitively, when, in fact, we know that that has severe limitations.

To suggest that the application of policing and criminal justice holds the key to dealing with destructive behaviours that are affecting our communities is akin to applying a plaster to a gaping wound: it may stop the bleeding in one small area for a few minutes, but it will not solve the problems. Such an approach criminalises problems that are not based in criminality. I accept that the proposer of the motion, Gerry Adams, tried to address those issues in his contribution, but it is not explicit in the wording of the motion.

Antisocial, abusive and disruptive behaviour are, in most cases, the result of complex, unmet needs. That is particularly true when the behaviour is repeated, creating prolific offenders, who enter the criminal justice system as juveniles and remain there for life. Punitive measures may make us feel good in the moment, and they might teach the offender a lesson, but, because they do not deal with the causes of antisocial — or even criminal — behaviour at their source, they solve little. Furthermore, they are expensive. If an encounter with the police or a spell in custody is what we are offering as solutions to complex societal problems, we are failing our children and young people.

The challenges of what we are calling “antisocial behaviour” are not limited to one area, neighbourhood or community in Northern Ireland; they are an issue for our society.

The amendment in my name attempts to address the source of the problems that lead to destructive behaviours, stating that the Assembly should call for:

“an inter-departmental, cross-sectional strategy, led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, that ensures safer communities by addressing issues of poverty, poor health, low educational achievement and lack of community and public resources.”

Those are the issues that are, typically, at the heart of the problems that we are trying to address. Only by applying a strategy of prevention and diversion will we remove and address the failures that lead to offending and antisocial behaviour.

The profile of the majority of young offenders who are in custody is similar. Most of them have familial problems, come from poverty or from disadvantaged backgrounds, have low educational attainment, and a lack of confidence and self-esteem. What are we doing

to our society when those young people feel safer and more comfortable when they are in an institution? There is something seriously wrong.

We must look at alternatives and examine any options that will help to provide young offenders with the chance to understand the impact of their behaviour. Furthermore, we must support communities and individual victims of crime. It is imperative that the behaviour is addressed, and it is important that the issue is dealt with holistically.

Alcohol use among young people is rising. The reason for that increase is not merely because alcohol is available in all colours of the rainbow or is cheaper to buy than a bottle of milk — though it is easy to point at those factors — rather, it is because children and young people choose to drink alcohol, which they will obtain by whatever means necessary. That is why I said that the issue must be dealt with holistically. To take alcohol from young people and pour it down the drain will not work; they will go out and buy more when they get the money.

The amendment is not a licence for criminal, abusive or antisocial behaviour; nor is it an attempt to excuse, forgive or ignore such behaviour. However, the Assembly must recognise that we will not make our communities or our young people feel safer simply by punishing them.

The amendment will drive policy that is based on a holistic understanding of the reasons and causes behind destructive behaviours so that we can address them effectively and earlier, when it is easier and more affordable to do so.

Any approach that we take will be less expensive than sending a sizeable proportion of our youth through the criminal justice system, most likely for life.

Mr McCausland: Many polls have been carried out on issues that are a priority for people in our communities, and one issue that appears at the top of the list, time and time again — particularly in surveys carried out by district policing partnerships and the Police Service of Northern Ireland — is antisocial behaviour and attacks on people and property. Not only is it the top priority for members of the public but a recent Assembly question for written answer highlighted the fact that there are many violent attacks on hospital staff, which is another example of unacceptable and antisocial behaviour. Across the board, antisocial behaviour is recognised as the top priority for most people.

Why do we have problems associated with antisocial, violent and unacceptable behaviour? The motion is correct in recognising that a range of factors, rather than a single one, contributes to such behaviour. Community cohesion has broken down, and there is a lack of respect and regard for others; there are also

societal issues. The media glamorises alcohol-fuelled behaviour as though it were perfectly acceptable and normal, and is something that all young people do. Therefore, it is not surprising that other young people pick up on that behaviour.

Family breakdown is also an issue. We must consider how we can support and strengthen the family unit, because strong families will create a much more stable, strong and coherent society.

We must also recognise human rights issues. Measures have been introduced to tackle some aspects of the problem of antisocial behaviour, but they have run into conflict with the human rights lobby. There was a bizarre situation in which legislation was being introduced to regularise the process of using test purchases in off-licences to try to detect those that were selling alcohol to underage people. The Human Rights Commission told us that it was a breach of the human rights of young people; however, the commission gave no thought to the human rights of the people who are affected by alcohol-fuelled antisocial behaviour. A whole range of factors is involved — societal, family, community and the bizarre human rights arguments.

There is also the legacy of violence. For years, young people in some communities were taught that it was right to riot; rioting was turned on and off for political ends. As a result, those young people got the message that it is perfectly all right to riot as they had been taught to do so, year after year. However, having turned on the rioting, it has become difficult for some communities to turn it off. That rioting is not always directed towards the police or the Army; it is quite often directed towards people in their own communities.

Any response to the situation must be multidisciplinary and interdepartmental. The Department for Social Development must play a role in introducing legislation. I have already pointed out that much unacceptable behaviour is alcohol-fuelled. People have been battered to death by young people roaming around at night in a state of intoxication. Legislation on alcohol is a matter for the Department for Social Development.

The Department of Education has responsibility for the Youth Service and citizenship in schools; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a role to ensure public safety; and one could list various responsibilities for other Departments. The motion is correct in calling for an interdepartmental and multidisciplinary approach.

Several good community safety initiatives exist, and there are also good examples of diversionary projects that encourage young people towards better behaviour and other activities.

My final point relates to the reference to the 2000 'Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern

Ireland' in the motion, which I do not want to allow to pass unnoticed.

The motion proposes that an interdepartmental, multidisciplinary strategy be informed by the Criminal Justice Review report. However, some areas of that review give me cause for concern, particularly the proposal to replace the district policing partnerships with community safety and policing partnerships. My issue is not with the principle of DPPs having more responsibility; rather, it is with the manner in which the matter would be dealt. There are already major concerns about DPPs; if their responsibilities were increased, so, too, would the number of concerns about them.

1.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: The wording of the motion lacks the clear definition that is needed to give it practical meaning. Although it refers to an interdepartmental, multidisciplinary strategy, it does nothing to define what Departments and disciplines would be involved. I fear that without that sharpness of definition, the motion is in danger of becoming a mere platitude. Of course, we are used to hearing platitudes from Sinn Féin Members; they are full of words, but strangely bereft of hard-headed, practical common sense.

The sponsors of this motion refer specifically —

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Member ever consult his colleagues on the Policing Board, who might give him a perspective entirely different from the very shallow one that he has just outlined?

Mr Kennedy: I will address all those issues shortly.

The proposers of the motion refer to the Patten Report. I must remind them that the Patten Report specifically says:

"policing with the community should be the core function of the police service and the core function of every police station ... every neighbourhood (or rural area) should have a dedicated policing team with lead responsibility for policing its area ... members of the policing team should serve at least three and preferably five years in the same neighbourhood".

Another recommendation is:

"neighbourhood policing teams be empowered to determine their own local priorities and set their own objectives, within the overall Annual Policing Plan and in consultation with community representatives."

Notice the importance of the PSNI in those recommendations. The Patten Report clearly emphasises the primacy and centrality of the PSNI in any neighbourhood policing strategy. It would, therefore, have been appropriate for the motion to refer to the PSNI, considering its overwhelming leadership role in the delivery of any strategy. Moreover, until policing and justice powers are devolved to the Assembly, if ever, it is premature for the Assembly to debate justice-focused measures. Until those powers

reside with the Assembly — and while policing matters affect the constituents of every Member — the implementation of any policing strategy will still involve bodies that are outside the Assembly's control.

It is not as if we do not have plenty of other matters to discuss. People expect us to deal with measures that will help them to survive the credit crunch and the world economic downturn. In fact, they expect us not only to talk, but to do. Sinn Féin proposes a motion that mentions co-ordination and interdepartmental and multidisciplinary strategies, while preventing the one main co-ordinating body of the Assembly — the Executive Committee — from meeting. That seems to me, and to the public whom I represent, to be mere political humbug.

In this motion, Sinn Féin calls for the strategy to be led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is laughable, given that the two Ministers cannot even meet to organise an Executive meeting, despite the massive backlog of Assembly papers. The Assembly has become a byword for non-activity. As a consequence, the Assembly is in a complete shambles. It has an Executive who do not meet and an Education Minister who has brought the education system to the point of meltdown. No decisions have been made on the national stadium or PPS 14.

We have a Minister of the Environment who does not appear to understand the basics of the road-tax and MOT system that he administers. In the midst of the shambles, we are confronted with the sheer cheek of a Sinn Féin's motion that calls for action from the Executive and the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is the same Executive that Sinn Féin is preventing from meeting — one just could not make it up.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Attwood: I do not intend to address the points that Mr Kennedy raised. However, what he said has much currency, and many people will agree with him. Despite our political difficulties, I will try to position the issue to respond best to the needs of the community.

In doing so, I will have to name one of the elephants in the room, or rather the Assembly, which is that although nobody can seriously dispute the need for an interdisciplinary, multi-departmental approach to community and social issues, a common feature of all recent cases of public concern in this part of the world is the administration of criminal justice. A concern about all those cases — whether they relate to kidnapping and bank-robbing, knife deaths or attacks on old women — is the conduct and management of the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland.

Members of the Policing Board can call the police to account. However, even if policing and justice powers are devolved, we will not be able to call the Director of the Public Prosecution Service and his

office to account on why cases are pursued despite a lack of evidence; why cases collapse without reasons being given; and why plea bargains are entered into when the entire community thinks that the loudest message should be sent out about issues such as knife crime. I want to address that elephant in the Chamber.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) may or may not get its act together, and there may or may not be an interdepartmental strategy to deal with such matters. However, unless changes are made, public confidence in the Public Prosecution Service will not reach the level of confidence that is beginning to be achieved in policing and in the Police Ombudsman. I acknowledge Gerry Adams's reference to the report from 2000, 'Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland', on the future administration of criminal justice. However, the SDLP feels that that report does not go far enough. If public confidence is to be built, a fundamental reassessment of the Public Prosecution Service is required in order to make it fit for purpose and accountable to the community that it serves.

The SDLP believes that an OFMDFM-led initiative must include a sentencing guidelines council. There is such a council in England, in which a wide range of people advises the judiciary on sentencing practice in cases of public concern. The Public Prosecution Service needs a management board à la Patten and the Policing Board — one that does not interfere with its operational responsibility but that calls it to account on how it is funded, is managed and makes decisions, especially in cases of public concern. Just like our policing arrangements, the Public Prosecution Service needs an independent complaints mechanism so that any families that have problems with how their cases were managed by the Public Prosecution Service, and how those cases ended in disrepute, have a basis —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have listened to the debate, and Members must try to stick to the motion and the business that is on the Floor of the House. I am listening carefully to Members, some of whom have gone outside the remit of the motion.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The motion calls for the inclusion of proposals that are:

“aimed at reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities”.

If we do not deal with the way in which one of the primary criminal justice agencies in Northern Ireland, which is responsible for reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities, conducts its affairs and does or does not prosecute individuals in this state, we are missing a serious point. Therefore, although I take note of what you have said, Mr Speaker, I certainly am speaking to the motion.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be careful. He has almost reached the point where he is challenging the authority of the Speaker. He must be very, very careful.

Mr Attwood: I am not challenging your authority or your ruling. My comments are consistent with what you outlined to the Chamber. I assume that I have an additional minute in which to speak.

In addition to dealing with that matter on a multidisciplinary —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up. I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party welcomes the motion and supports it as it stands. Although we recognise the merit of the amendment, we oppose it, because we do not view it as being in line with the spirit of the motion.

The Alliance Party will always argue against any attempt to distinguish between the content of a motion such as this one and the reality of ongoing paramilitary activity, including murals and the territorial marking of property. The Assembly should support the motion in order to prove its disgust at, for instance, last week's arms find and to condemn completely ongoing so-called loyalist paramilitary activity and so-called dissident republican activity. Therefore, the unionist parties should support the motion as it stands. We can agree on a motion that focuses on causes on another occasion.

What should the Assembly say about the symptoms of paramilitary behaviour? Much greater clarity is needed on the recent arms find, and it must be understood that, whether UVF-related or otherwise, it proves that so-called loyalists cannot put weapons beyond use on their own terms. That process must be completed in the presence of independent observers.

Furthermore, devolution of policing and justice would better enable a joined-up approach to those issues, as all the relevant agencies would come under the ultimate authority of the Northern Ireland Executive. Of course, that would only apply if the Northern Ireland Executive ever get down to meeting.

Mr Speaker: Order. The motion is wide-ranging, but all sides of the House and the Member must try to address it.

Mr McCarthy: Mr Speaker, I will do my best to yield to your command.

Issues such as access to alcohol in supermarkets — you see, I am getting to the point — *[Laughter.]* — where it can be bought in bulk more cheaply than water, and illegal drugs on the streets must be tackled. The latter of those issues must not progress to the problem of harder drugs, which blights cities such as Dublin and Glasgow. Many experts point out that hard

drugs are responsible for the higher crime rates in those cities compared with those in Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland.

Although it is reasonable to talk about rationalising community safety partnerships and district policing partnerships, the motion shows that their work must be properly funded. I pay tribute to all the work that is carried out by the local community safety partnerships and district policing partnerships in all the localities in Northern Ireland.

We cannot run away from the issue of paramilitarism and so-called dissident activity; unfortunately, it hasn't gone away you know.

2.00 pm

Policing and justice powers must also be devolved to a functioning Executive sooner rather than later. That would ensure that issues such as access to alcohol and drugs, which render too many communities unsafe, are better tackled. It would also help to ensure that policing is properly funded and resourced. Everything that can be done should be done in order to ensure that people, in particular senior citizens, are safe in their homes.

Therefore, although the Alliance Party recognises the amendment's merit, the Assembly must unite behind the motion and properly reflect on what it means. A good start would be for the lead parties in the Executive to demonstrate more responsibility.

Mr Shannon: I will try to keep to the point as indicated by the wording of the motion.

I, like probably all elected representatives, face issues of community safety and problems on a daily basis. I see homes every day that are torn apart by alcohol and, to a lesser extent, by drug abuse. I see families divided and children emotionally damaged by the misuse of alcohol and drugs; and I know that it does not have to be that way.

The motion refers to:

“proposals on alcohol-related crime and prolific offenders, aimed at reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities”.

Those are issues that I want addressed.

Northern Ireland is suffering from an epidemic of domestic violence. It is estimated that some one in four women in the Province have been physically abused by their partners. In the majority of those cases, alcohol misuse is the major factor. Every year, 1.5 million people in the UK fall victim to alcohol-fuelled violence. It is clear that community safety is threatened by the misuse of alcohol.

Police superintendents say that alcohol plays a part in half of all crime. A study for the Home Office in 1990 found that growth in beer consumption, for

example, was the single most important factor in explaining a growth in violent crime against the person. Research also shows that high proportions of victims of violent crime are drinking, or are under the influence of alcohol, at the time of assault. An analysis of data from the 41 probation areas between 1 April 2004 and 31 March 2005 by the offender assessment system data evaluation and analysis team — that is a big sentence and a big name for any group — found that 37% of offenders had a current problem with alcohol. A similar proportion — 37% — had a problem with binge drinking. Nearly half — 47% — had misused alcohol in the past, and 32% had records of violent behaviour that was related to their alcohol use. Those statistics are horrifying and worrying and make it clear that a change is needed.

There may not be the same spread of drug abuse in the Province as on the mainland, but it is definitely on the rise, and misuse at any level is too high. There exists a culture among young people who believe that a joint of cannabis every so often will do no harm. It is time to dispel that myth. Medical evidence shows that the use of cannabis leads to mental-health problems that have been previously discussed in the Chamber, and on which the Minister of Health has commented.

Unless problems are dealt with now they will grow to immense proportions. That is what the motion attempts to address. What is possibly less clear is the solution. I work with many community and residents' associations in my constituency. They are determined to stamp out abuse in their areas, and do so in many ways — through education programmes for children, through ensuring that there is a safer option available for children than standing at street corners, where they may be pressurised into trying alcopops, smoking or taking drugs.

Community groups in my area are working hard to break the vicious circle of alcoholism and drug use. They cannot do that on their own, which is where the crux of the motion comes into play. A system must be put in place that lends support, offers advice, and co-ordinates events and information in order to ensure that people are informed. With the limited resources at its disposal for community policing, the PSNI does a wonderful job in my constituency. Ards is privileged to have community police officers who are well known and who do an excellent job in relation to antisocial behaviour in the community, and in dealing with the young people involved. However, they cannot do enough; they cannot shoulder the burden. It is for that reason that we must consider the wording of the motion.

The strategy must span all Departments, as they will be the winners. Young people could be taught how to drink in moderation through programmes co-ordinated by community groups and funded by the Department for Social Development (DSD). The Health Service

would also be a winner, as it would no longer have its weekend influx of people with injuries caused by overindulgence in alcohol. The Department of Health funds and co-ordinates community projects which outline the medical problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse.

DSD would also be a winner, with fewer breakages and less damage done to properties, if people realised that they were affecting their long-term health through binge drinking.

Time does not permit me to continue illustrating the benefits to other Departments, but it is clear that the problem can be tackled. If it is tackled on all fronts and co-ordinated by OFMDFM, we can make a difference and the whole of Northern Ireland will benefit. Individual Departments can make a difference, but if all the Departments work together, they will make a greater change.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I support all that my colleague Gerry Adams said.

Community safety is an issue that is being raised with us daily on the doorsteps, and Sinn Féin believes that everyone has the right to live safely in their home and in their community. Everyone has the right to have a fully accountable policing service, imbued with a human rights ethos, and to have a justice system in which they can have confidence. However, the reality is that communities across the North are blighted by crime, antisocial behaviour, underage drinking, drug abuse and all the associated problems. Therefore, is it any wonder that many people have lost confidence in the policing and justice system? Is it any wonder that pensioners are terrified in their homes when their 999 calls go unanswered? Is it any wonder that people from all areas, regardless of their creed or politics, are demanding action to rid our streets of crime and antisocial behaviour?

Unmet and complex social, education and health needs must be addressed in a holistic way. Sinn Féin believes that those needs should not go unanswered, and there is an onus on all of us to play our part in achieving the kind of safe society in which it is fit to raise the next generation.

As the motion states, the strategy should include fundamental proposals on alcohol-related crime and persistent offenders. Our communities are crying out for justice. They are sick, sore and tired of seeing repeat offenders walk free from court with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. They are sick, sore and tired of being scared in their own homes. They are sick, sore and tired of watching communities being torn apart by hoods and thugs. The vast majority of

decent young people are being held to ransom by anti-community elements.

Many Members will remember the horrific murder last year of Jim McFadden in my constituency of Derry. He was savagely beaten to death in front of his children after attending a family wedding. Jim was a devoted father and husband, and his only crime was to defend his daughter's honour, but he paid for it with his life.

A number of people have appeared in court charged with Jim's murder, and they have been released on bail pending their trial. Everyone has the right to the presumption of innocence and to be granted bail where appropriate. I fully support and defend that right, but some of the people who stand accused of Jim's murder have been repeatedly brought before the courts for breaching the conditions of their release. Time and time again, they have been found to be in breach of their bail conditions, yet their bail has not been revoked.

Mr Speaker: I must caution the Member to be careful about speaking on individual cases.

Ms Anderson: What is the point of imposing bail conditions if they are not going to be enforced? I have met members of the McFadden family, and I am sure that other Members have done likewise. This situation is only adding to their great distress and anguish. Many families are suffering as a result of similar situations. The justice system has failed many families even before trials have begun. Similar stories are being repeated right across the North, and they are happening in all the constituencies that we represent.

People are rightly demanding action to end the revolving-door justice system. For how long will those demands fall on deaf ears, particularly those of some parties in the Assembly? The most effective way to resolve the issues is through the transfer of policing and justice powers as envisaged in the Patten Report, the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews review, in conjunction with a truly interdepartmental multidisciplinary strategy spearheaded by OFMDFM.

No one will convince me that a British Minister sitting in a comfortable leafy suburb in the garden of England cares about the realities of life in the Bogside, the Shankill, the Fountain or the Falls. Even Iris Robinson recognised that point, when only this weekend she called on British Ministers to stay out of our affairs in relation to extending Westminster legislation to the North. I agree with Mrs Robinson; British interference in Ireland has been going on for too long — in fact, over 800 years. *[Interruption.]*

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

Ms Anderson: We need a local Minister who understands the reality of life in our community and who is prepared to do something about it.

Mr Moutray: Other Members have mentioned the upsurge in alcohol-related crime and antisocial behaviour over several years, which must be addressed urgently. Ultimately, such behaviour is a problem plaguing many of our cities, towns and villages, and we hear about it all too often in our constituency offices.

Alcohol-related crime and antisocial behaviour in the community continue to cause much apprehension and concern, particularly to elderly people and those living alone, who often fall victim to such activity. Those types of behaviour cause undoubted misery to many individuals, families and communities, and must be addressed.

Antisocial behaviour covers a range of selfish and unacceptable activities that can blight the quality of community life. It does not just make life unpleasant; it ultimately holds back the regeneration of disadvantaged areas and creates an environment in which more serious crime can, and often does, take hold.

Much antisocial behaviour is the result of a failed family environment: a lack of respect within the family and in society at large; poor schooling and educational attainment; poor community life; poor accommodation and employment, and personal and individual factors, such as alienation and lack of social commitment; and a large percentage of unsupervised time spent with peers who are involved in problem behaviour.

There is a role for OFMDFM in reducing those problems. However, it is important to adopt an interdepartmental approach that encompasses all Departments. There is a role for all in trying to reduce and eradicate antisocial behaviour. There must be a more joined-up approach to tackling the problem head-on and dealing with it. For example, the Department for Social Development has some responsibility for licensing and social inclusion, while the Department of Education is responsible for educating young people and encouraging them not to get involved in antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, the Department of Education also has a role in helping to provide statutory and voluntary youth activities.

Those Departments have a key role to play in reducing antisocial behaviour, and more funding is needed to assist the provision of youth activities. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety plays an important role as regards public safety and mental-health provision. However, there is a role for other bodies, such as HM Revenue and Customs, which is responsible for eradicating the supply of counterfeit goods and smuggled properties from society. The existence of such goods means that there is a readily-available supply of alcohol and other substances that contribute to the problem greatly.

There is a role for local government in facilitating community safety partnerships and district policing

partnerships in order to tackle problems where communities are worst affected. We are faced with serious problems, and if they are not addressed, they will spiral further out of control.

It is ironic that Sinn Féin has tabled the motion, when it is the party that is dragging its heels on the progress of legislation through the Assembly.

I call on that party, today, to get down to business, and to attend the Executive meetings, which will ultimately assist in addressing the important issues that currently affect so many in our society.

2.15 pm

Mr Elliott: What fiction is the Assembly being asked to support by this Sinn Féin motion? If the First Minister and the deputy First Minister cannot organise Executive meetings during a global economic crisis, are we really to expect that the public will believe it when we call on them to lead a community safety strategy? However, considering that some other parties in this House seem intent on proceeding with that fiction, I will outline my party's stance on community safety.

At the very heart of community safety is genuine support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the rule of law. Without such support, we can have all the community safety strategies that we want, but they will make no difference. Without support for the PSNI and the rule of law, communities are not — and will not be — safe.

It is therefore slightly disturbing that a motion on the issue of community safety fails to explicitly refer to support for the PSNI and the rule of law. Such an explicit statement is surely necessary, in light of our troubled past. It is unfortunately the case that many neighbourhoods and communities in Northern Ireland are plagued by the continual threat of criminal activity and antisocial behaviour. The first step in giving hope to those communities is for all political representatives to fully, and without equivocation, support the police and the rule of law.

None of that is to deny that the reasons for antisocial and criminal behaviour are complex, and that social exclusion can contribute to both. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party is broadly supportive of the idea of a community safety strategy, while recognising that policing and justice powers are not devolved to the Assembly, and, quite clearly, cannot be in the foreseeable future. The district policing partnerships and community safety partnerships provide an opportunity at a local level to co-operate on a much better basis than is sometimes the case at the moment.

I note the work that has been carried out by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, with the NIO, on the young people and alcohol action plan. The Department for Social Development

has also been active in promoting community involvement in reducing crime through the neighbourhood renewal scheme, and that is to be welcomed. That is precisely the type of practical project that the Executive — when, or if, they eventually meet — should concentrate on.

Alcohol-related crime is on the increase in Northern Ireland. Crime committed under the influence of alcohol rose from 2,330 incidents reported in 2002, to 2,932 in 2006. Drunken and disorderly behaviour is, unfortunately, becoming more of a menace in society, and it is correct that the motion seeks to address that. The Health Minister's leadership in respect of the young people and alcohol action plan, and his recent initiatives to highlight the impact of binge drinking, demonstrate what the Executive can do, and should be doing, to promote community safety.

There has been some progress on support for the PSNI and the rule of law from those in this community who formerly undermined them. I am pleased that there has been even more recognition of that today. There is, of course, more to be done, but a start has to be made, and it must be made abundantly clear that, without explicit and genuine support for the PSNI and the rule of law, all talk of a community safety strategy is nothing more than hypocrisy. People deserve the right to feel safe in their homes and communities. Police officers, who carry out an extremely difficult task, deserve the support and respect of every community in Northern Ireland, and all democratic political representatives must help to deliver that outcome.

It seems that some parties, particularly Sinn Féin, believe that they can treat debates in this House as a bad joke. For 122 days, Sinn Féin has blocked meetings of the Executive Committee. That blockage has its origins in OFMDFM, and yet Sinn Féin members, including its party leader, have proposed a motion calling for an interdepartmental, multidisciplinary strategy, to be led by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

How exactly are the First Minister and the deputy First Minister going to lead such a strategy when they cannot even hold an Executive meeting?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs D Kelly: It is regrettable that there was not a composite motion to take account of the amendment, proposed by Ms Purvis, because much of it is quite accurate given the number of people in young offenders' institutions. However, it would be wrong for the House to present the view to the public that it is only disadvantaged families who live in marginalised communities. In my constituency office, I often hear about parents in flash cars dropping their children off and providing them with alcohol. Therefore, it is difficult to provide the image that it is only people

from disadvantaged communities who are involved in antisocial behaviour.

However, I accept that it is the people who live in those areas who must deal with the reality and the consequences of crime and who suffer most from antisocial behaviour and vandalism. Perhaps some of that is down to Sinn Féin's very belated support for policing. In the past, many communities, in both loyalist and republican areas, were under the jackboot of paramilitaries, and unacceptable behaviour was never dealt with by the law in the way which it ought to have been.

Many Members have said today that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, and other agencies have a role to play. That is quite right and proper. It is also the case that Departments have the power —

Ms S Ramsey: I am glad that the Member mentioned the roles of the Health Department, the Education Department and other agencies. Does the Member recall a motion that I moved some weeks ago calling on the Minister for Social Development to use her power and influence to make it harder for young people to access drink from off-sales and similar outlets?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. If the Minister for Social Development were allowed to bring her papers to the Executive, perhaps the Member would see proposals that would address some of those problems.

I am the mother of four children. Parental responsibility plays a key role in determining what happens in communities. I know that young people who behave in an antisocial manner are often brought to their parents' home by the police. Indeed, I am also aware of neighbours who are concerned about the behaviour of some young people. At a recent community group meeting in Craigavon, the names of some young people who were messing about in the local community were mentioned. Subsequently, the parents of the young people named at the meeting marched to the house of the person who had named them. Some parents do not take the concerns of the community seriously. People also marched to the house of an eyewitness who said that, following a series of burglaries in the area, they had seen a young person acting suspiciously. Safeguards must be put in place for people who want to improve their communities.

Members were right when they said the issue was about partnership. Mr Adams talked about the district policing partnerships and the community safety partnerships, and he is quite right: the NIO has produced a paper; members of the Policing Board have seen it, and it was discussed at last week's policing

board committees. However, I do not believe that any party will support the paper, because it seeks to diminish the role of the policing boards and fails to deal with some of the key issues in community safety. If the key issue is about young and disadvantaged people, surely the Executive and OFMDFM should have published 'Lifetime Opportunities'.

Why did Sinn Féin allow the Executive to cut funding for children and young people if, as it says, alcohol is one of the primary causes of young people's antisocial behaviour. Young people say that they commit crime because they are bored. Members are right to say that there are societal issues involved in dealing with alcohol-related crime.

Mr F McCann: I notice that the Member mentioned Sinn Féin once again during her speech. Does she remember that the Department for Social Development forgot to provide a submission to OFMDFM during its inquiry on children and young people?

Mrs D Kelly: I am not sure if that claim is accurate, but it will be examined. The Member ought to know that DSD has examined the effect of poverty on children and young people, and is doing a significant amount of work on the issue. That was demonstrated last week when the Minister for Social Development announced millions of pounds in additional support for neighbourhood renewal areas.

Sinn Féin Members seem to be sore about some of my points. Perhaps that is because the cap fits. As many people are beginning to recognise, Sinn Féin has rolled over to the DUP on many issues, and, sometimes, the truth hurts. Planning crime also affects other ministerial portfolios, such as the Department of the Environment. There must be much more support for families, we must examine parental responsibility and, using existing resources, Ministers have an opportunity to examine how they can advance strategies and actions to address antisocial behaviour and designing crime.

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 Mr McKay.

A delegation from the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission is visiting the Assembly, and its members are in the Public Gallery. On behalf of the Assembly, I extend the warmest welcome to the delegation, the Ceann Comhairle Mr John O'Donoghue and other distinguished guests.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Coláiste Speirín

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education why she has turned down a development proposal to allow the establishment of an Irish-medium post-primary college, Coláiste Speirín, in Cookstown. (AQO 705/09)

Mr McGlone: Ceist uimhir a haon.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. For translation purposes, the Member said, “question No 1.”

Ní féidir le duine ar bith a bheith in amhras faoi mo dhílseacht féin i leith na Gaeilge, agus is léir go bhfuil mé tiomanta dona chinntiú go ndírítear ar an easpa sholáthar iarbhunscoile in earnáil na Gaelscolaíochta.

No one can doubt my commitment to Irish as a language, and my evident determination to ensure that the lack of post-primary provision in the Irish-medium sector is addressed. There is a demand for such provision from parents whose children attend Irish-medium primary schools, and that was recognised in the review of Irish-medium education. I have a copy of the review report, in Irish and English, which my Department launched last week, and Members will shortly receive a copy.

My Department has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-language education. However, I also need to be satisfied that any proposal for a new school will lead to a viable establishment that provides good-quality education for all pupils. On 11 October 2008, I launched the review of Irish-medium education. I want extensive consultation across Ireland, North and South, and there will be consultation in the four provinces: Connaught, Munster, Leinster and Ulster.

I will listen carefully to all the views expressed as part of the consultation exercise and the decision-making process. I encourage all those who are involved with Coláiste Speirín, and others who want to provide Irish-medium post-primary education, to consider the proposals in the report and to decide where to go from here.

I considered the proposal for Coláiste Speirín carefully. I met, and listened to the views of, those involved. However, I was not convinced that that particular

proposal could achieve sustainable intakes. Coláiste Speirín enrolled six pupils in the 2007-08 school year, and attracted three new pupils in the 2008-09 intake. Those figures fall far short of those required in order to qualify for recurrent funding. I was also not satisfied that the proposed funding arrangements with Coláiste Feirste would represent a good way forward to deliver Irish-medium post-primary provision in the area, given that Coláiste Feirste is 45 miles away.

I recognise the demand from parents in the mid-Ulster area to have post-primary Irish-medium education. The Irish-medium education report includes recommendations for the development of sustainable post-primary provision, and I am in close contact with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta — one of the bodies tasked with developing that, and Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta. Other interested stakeholders are examining jointly how a strategic approach should best be progressed, and I will keep the House updated on that matter.

Mr McGlone: Cuirim an-spéis sa méid atá le rá ag an Aire. Cuirim fáilte fosta roimh na cuairteoirí ón Oireachtas.

I welcome Members of the Oireachtas. It is important that they are with us today, because the Minister referred to all-island elements of forbairt na Gaeilge. Does the Minister realise that the unit in St Catherine's College in Ard Mhacha was granted unit status with 10 pupils in 2002 — only one more pupil than Coláiste Speirín at An Chorr Chríochach.

The Minister of Education: Coláiste Chaitríona was a unit of St Catherine's, and it was in the same building. Yes; it started with 10 pupils, and it has grown to be a very successful and oversubscribed post-primary school.

Coláiste Chaitríona, the Irish-medium unit attached to St Catherine's in Armagh, is the closest alternative for families in the Cookstown area, as the Member will know. Looking to the longer term, the report on Irish-medium post-primary provision will lead to a sustainable solution for post-primary Irish-medium education to serve pupils in each of the Six Counties — and that is what the Department of Education is examining.

The Department is examining how to provide post-primary education to children who leave rang a seacht — P7 — in order to adhere to the entitlement framework and bring about collaboration, good practice and support among Irish-medium schools. A network of post-primary schools is needed throughout the North. At present, provision is limited to Coláiste Feirste in Belfast and Coláiste Chaitríona in Armagh. Therefore, gaps in provision exist. That is what the Department is working to correct. Mr McGlone and,

indeed, all Members, will see increasing support for Irish language in the near future.

Mr I McCrea: I am pinching myself, because I almost welcome the Minister's decision. Any decision from her is certainly a welcome development. A 'Belfast Telegraph' reporter claimed that the Minister is a greater threat to Irish than the entire English language. Given that the Irish language has been the single biggest battleground in Sinn Féin's policy of decolonisation, and is the reason why it has become politicised and a divisive issue in society, has the Minister not got the slightest flicker of recognition, or dawning realisation, that she and her party colleagues carry the greatest guilt for that and that they have greatest responsibility to end the language's politicisation?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister can choose whether she wants to answer that question.

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his support, and I look forward to it when I inform the House about my future decisions on post-primary provision in the North of Ireland. I will introduce proposals on the development of post-primary education. In light of the Assembly's statutory duty on Irish-medium education, I look forward to the support of the party opposite.

I do not agree with the second part of the Member's comments. As a parent, I have never politicised the Irish language. Thousands of parents throughout the North of Ireland do not choose the schools to which they send their children in order to annoy my unionist colleagues. That is not the way in which parents make choices for their children. *[Interruption.]*

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

The Minister of Education: Parents make choices by asking what type of education is best for their children. Whether people like or accept it, thousands of parents throughout the North of Ireland choose to send their children to Irish-medium schools. I support their choice and their right to make it.

Parents make the same choices when they decide whether to send their children to integrated schools, Catholic schools, controlled schools, and so on. The least that the Assembly can do is to respect parents' right to choose the type of education that they want for their children. I am glad to see that Basil McCrea agrees with me. Obviously, the matter must be based on equality.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In light of the fact that increasing numbers of children are being educated in the primary sector through the medium of Irish, what can the Minister tell parents of pupils in my constituency of Mid Ulster

who want their children to avail themselves of Irish-medium post-primary provision?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I thank the Member for her question. Many young people reach rang a seacht — P7 — only to learn that there is no Irish-medium post-primary provision for them, not only in Mid Ulster, but throughout the North of Ireland. That situation must be remedied. I intend to do so through sustainable, strategic planning for the number of children that is required for post-primary provision. Some Members played around with figures and said that certain schools were started with a particular number of children. There is a big difference between starting a primary school and starting a post-primary school.

Members are aware that there is an entitlement framework in the North. A broad curriculum is also in place. Sustainable, strategic development of Irish-medium education is needed throughout the Six Counties.

North/South Educational Exchanges

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Education to outline the main findings of the review of North/South educational exchanges; and how she intends to proceed with this. (AQO 700/09)

The Minister of Education: North/South co-operation in education is top of my agenda. I am particularly committed to ensuring that young people, youth workers and teachers throughout the island get the opportunity to participate in exchanges that will strengthen and develop organisational relationships and partnerships and that will increase cross-border understanding.

I work very closely with the former Minister for Education and Science in the South of Ireland, Mary Hanafin, and with the new Minister for Education and Science, Batt O'Keeffe. I have attended a number of cross-border events, among them the development of North/South co-operation in relation to underachievement and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); an annual national conference in Limerick, concerning Irish-medium education; the launch of a North/South together tool kit for ethnic minority children, which went to every primary school across the island; the launch of a lift-off programme, which is a human rights programme between various teacher unions, North and South; and many other conferences and events. I believe that together, North and South, we can work to provide the best quality education for children.

In April 2002, the North/South Ministerial Council endorsed a structure comprising a programme management committee, a standing advisory committee and a joint delivery agency. The two Education Departments

were asked to give effect to the proposed structure and to determine the appropriate legal framework. The two Departments worked toward the establishment of structures to facilitate policy development and to support and co-ordinate this diverse field of activity.

With the restoration of the North/South Ministerial Council in May 2007, the Departments felt that, given the time that had passed, it was essential to review the approach to facilitating and managing North/South exchanges. The Departments remained committed to North/South exchanges as a means of contributing to the fostering of mutual understanding, and to working for opportunities of mutual benefit. It was their view that the arrangements deemed appropriate before the suspension of the institutions in 2002 should be considered again in the markedly changing context. In December 2007, the Departments commissioned a review of North/South co-operation, which was carried out jointly, with a view to identifying a range of options for future progress.

I am extremely grateful to the many people on the ground who have made, and will continue to make, those exchanges happen. I pay tribute to those who have worked so hard to encourage and facilitate exchanges, and I know that many of those people have had the opportunity to feed into the review. The key finding of the review is that the circumstances and timing are appropriate for the two Departments to have a coherent and conjoined policy approach, and I look forward to that.

I have received the report from the review team, along with the recommendations from my officials, which I am considering. I will be meeting with my colleague from the South, Batt O’Keeffe, and we will jointly discuss and agree the next steps, after we have had the opportunity to consider the report.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister, and acknowledge that she said that cross-border education is top of her agenda. Does she share the concern that six years ago, policies were agreed between Governments in respect of a programme management committee, a standing advisory committee and a joint delivery agency, and six years later, following the review that she commissioned, the height of what has been proposed is, as she said one minute ago:

“a coherent and conjoined policy approach”?

Is that not just more meaningless words? What has happened to the good hard proposals that were on the table and agreed six years ago?

The Minister of Education: I make no apology for wanting to make North/South proposals, and working together, as part of the policy between the two Departments. It worries me that the Member appears to think that we should not put North/South exchanges at the core of everything that the Department does.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for her answer. She has told us that North/South exchanges are at the top of her agenda, but where do east-west exchanges stand on that agenda? Will she detail what she has done to facilitate east-west exchanges, especially as Northern Ireland is closer to Galloway in Scotland than it is to Galway in the Irish Republic?

The Minister of Education: I have always viewed British/Irish relations as very important. Anyone who looks at the work that I have done to build links, on a range of issues, with England, Scotland and Wales, will understand how important building those relationships is.

I am thankful that we are building a different type of relationship with our neighbouring island to the one we had for centuries and, fortunately, it is based on equality and partnership arrangements.

2.45 pm

As the Members sitting opposite know, I value highly working with our Celtic cousins in Scotland, and they lead the way on many educational issues. Members will be glad to hear that we learn from them on a range of issues, such as Scots Gaelic, the post-primary system, underachievement, and so forth. People will be aware that I travelled to Scotland to meet my colleague there.

I also attended a British-Irish meeting at Stormont and an excellent meeting in Dublin. It was good to meet our cousins from different areas, such as the Isle of Man. Members can, therefore, see the importance that I place on British-Irish relations. We have much to learn from England, Scotland and Wales, and from the islands that surround both our islands.

Mr Burnside: I will not ask my question in Gaelic today because I do not want to offend our friends from the Dáil. They are used to listening to the proceedings there — where English is normally spoken.

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

Mr Burnside: It concerns me that the Minister puts North/South dialogue at the top of her agenda. Is it not more important to put the priorities and needs of education in Northern Ireland at the top of her agenda? Why does she not examine the fact that Northern Ireland has state, voluntary, integrated and Irish-medium systems of education? If she compares North with South, and east with west, she will discover more forms of education here than in any other part of the British Isles. A few additional priorities exist, such as the selection procedure between primary and secondary education. It concerns me greatly that the Minister has the wrong subject at the top of her agenda.

The Minister of Education: The Member knows that, since I took up office, I have done a huge amount

of work to increase equality in the education system. He will also know that, every year, 12,000 young people leave the system without attaining GCSEs in English and maths. No one in the House wants his or her child to leave school without those qualifications. Therefore, I placed dealing with underachievement and increasing equality at the top of my agenda. One good way to go about that is to learn from what works well in the South, and the Department is also learning from England, Scotland and Wales.

I would welcome a contribution from the Member on how to deal with the 47% of children who leave school every year having been failed by the system. If the parties on the other side of the Chamber want to sit on their hands and do nothing about that, that is up to them, but I am not prepared to preside over education apartheid in the North of Ireland. That is why I introduced proposals to make changes to ensure that all children have opportunities. For too long, too many children were failed. That must stop; children will not be failed on my watch.

Review of Public Administration

3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education what meetings she has had with the (i) Chief Executives; and (ii) Chairpersons, of the Education and Library Boards in relation to the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 786/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí cuid mhór díospóireachtaí agam le cathaoirligh na mbord oideachais agus leabharlainne ar na mallaibh. Tá mé i mo chathaoirleach ar fhóram chathaoirligh an RPA, a thig le chéile go rialta. Go dtí seo, eagraíodh na cruinnithe seo i mBéal Feirste, in Ard Mhacha, san Iúr, ar an Ómaigh, i nDoire agus in Aontroim.

Recently, I had numerous discussions with the chairpersons of the education and library boards, and I chair the review of public administration (RPA) chairpersons' forum that meets regularly. To date, meetings have been held in Belfast, Armagh, Newry, Omagh, Derry and Antrim. The forum gives the chairpersons of all organisations that are affected by RPA an opportunity to engage with me, and I brief them on RPA developments. We discuss the best way of engaging the organisations that are involved, and we jointly examine the issues to be faced in maintaining service continuity during the period of transition.

The RPA chairpersons' forum invites to its meetings the chairpersons of the five education and library boards; the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment; CCMS, the Youth Council; Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; the Council for Integrated Education, and the Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards.

Furthermore, representatives of the General Teaching Council are welcome to attend. If the chairperson of that organisation cannot attend a meeting, the vice-chairperson can attend instead. I am delighted that so many busy people have attended those important meetings, and I will chair forums regularly in the coming months.

Given the important issues under discussion, I am disappointed that one education and library board has attended one meeting only. All other boards have attended the majority of meetings.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her response. What level of engagement have her senior officials had with education stakeholders on RPA in education?

The Minister of Education: In addition to measures outlined in my previous response, my officials conduct regular discussions on RPA with stakeholders. Those discussions will continue in the coming months. For example, the Department's permanent secretary, Will Haire, and other senior officials meet regularly with the chief executives of the education and library boards. Furthermore, I have met with them on several occasions.

Senior departmental officials and the education and skills authority (ESA) implementation team meet regularly with key education-sector officials and trade unions. In May and June, the ESA implementation team held 20 workshops, which involved 350 managers in the sector. Moreover, four workshops were held to hear the views of a cross-section of primary and post-primary principals on how the ESA can deliver better services to schools. Positive engagement with staff in the education organisations is ongoing.

Mr Poots: Will the Minister confirm what meetings she has had with the chairperson of the South Eastern Education and Library Board? It seems that such meetings are impossible because, despite repeated promises, she has not reinstalled that board. The direct rule Administration people are still there at a cost of £500 a day. Will the Minister confirm that she will bring back the South Eastern Education and Library Board and reinstall public accountability to education in that area given that she has not held any meetings there?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. The South Eastern Education and Library Board is a member of the RPA chairperson's forum, and it always sends representatives to meetings. I have met with the chairperson of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. As the Member will be aware, I met with the political representatives and the non-political — appointed — representatives of the board. Members will know that there were difficulties with governance and financial accountability, and I have held discussions aimed at making sure that political representatives and laypeople understand their

governance and accountability responsibilities, and my officials are working with representatives of the board. As the Member knows, I will be introducing proposals in due course.

Mr Elliott: What discussions has the Minister had with the education boards — and, specifically, the transferor representatives in that section — so that they will not be discriminated against?

The Minister of Education: As I have said in the House repeatedly, I will ensure that all sectors are treated fairly. My intention is that the second RPA Bill will include provisions to reform and simplify the composition of boards of governors of grant-aided schools. I recognise the important contribution made by transferors, and my officials and I have had discussions with that group. It was never anyone's intention to discriminate against any sectoral groups, including transferors who play an important role in education.

Post-Primary Transfer Process

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education what advice her Department is providing to teachers and parents of pupils currently in primary 6, in relation to the post-primary transfer process they will face.

(AQO 726/09)

The Minister of Education: Thank you, Basil.

Tá freagra tugtha agam ar an cheist seo ar roinnt ócáidí, agus tá an freagra fós mar an gcéanna. Tá mé ag brath ar ghairmiúlacht na bpríomhoidí agus na múinteoirí chun an curaclam athbheithnithe a theagasc, nó is é sin go díreach atá de dhíth chun páistí a ullmhú do na socrúithe atá á moladh agam le haghaidh aistriú iarbhunscóile. Is ceart mar sin do mo chomhghleacaithe sa Choiste Feidhmiúcháin breithniú dáiríre a dhéanamh orthu.

As the Member will be aware, I have answered this question on a number of occasions, and my answer remains the same. I look to the professionalism of principals and teachers to deliver the revised curriculum, for that is precisely what is required to prepare children for the post-primary transfer arrangements that I propose. Those proposed arrangements merit serious consideration by my colleagues in the Executive.

The Department has just issued 350,000 leaflets — in Irish to Irish-speaking schools and in English to schools that teach through the medium of English. Those leaflets provide details of the revised curriculum, and they will go to every parent who has a child in the primary or post-primary sector.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you very much, Caitríona. The issue is about choice. Earlier, in answer to Mr

McGlone's question, I heard the Minister talking about parents making choices about integrated, Irish-medium or other schools. Will she not agree that it is important that parents and their children have a choice about the school that the children go to — be that a grammar school, a high school, the school that is next to them, or a specialist school? Will she give some indication to the thousands upon thousands of parents with children in P6 as to what their children should do to prepare for the next phase of their education?

The Minister of Education: Parents should have choice, but within a framework of equality. The current system is not equal because it divides children on the basis of two one-hour tests for which parents who can afford it can coach their children.

Choice must be based on equality because there is equality legislation in the North of Ireland. If we are serious about dealing with the significant body of underachievement in our system, we have to create a fair one, and that is what I am going to do. In relation to the parents of P6 children, the Department has produced a leaflet that contains information on the revised curriculum. I also wrote to every single principal regarding the revised curriculum in June 2008.

Teachers are professional — they know what they want to teach, and they know that there has been a distortion of the primary curriculum. This year's 11-plus will be the last. Under the compromise proposals that I have brought forward, the test will no longer be sat in primary schools. There will be a three-year phased ending to academic selection.

Teachers and parents of P6 children need to know that the revised curriculum is a good one. Teachers like it and it stimulates our young people. Furthermore, no longer does it divide our young people and create an elitist education system in which some children can go to certain schools because of where they live, or because their parents have more money than parents of other children. Statistics indicate that 19% of secondary schools provide free school meals, but only 7% of grammar schools do.

Many grammar schools understand the need for change, which I welcome. I have had dinners with post-primary school principals right across the North. I have another one tomorrow night in Derry. I was in Ballymena last week and Limavady the week before that. I was also in Newry, Downpatrick and all different parts of the North. I will continue to do that because educationalists know what is, and what is not, good for our children. High-stake tests at 11 years of age, for which children can be coached, are not the way forward.

Mr Storey: At least we now know that the Minister of Education has moved on from the idea of using a postcode lottery to place a child in a post-primary

school based on where he or she lives, to a system based on where a child eats. She is now going to use —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question. The time for questions to the Minister of Education is almost up.

Mr Storey: She is now the dinner lady of the education service instead of being the Education Minister.

Will the Minister reveal what amendments she has made to her proposals, as she knows that there is no political consensus on them as they stand? What amendments has she made to her proposals to make them acceptable, so that the Executive might be able to agree them? Although I have to wonder whether there will ever be an Executive meeting, owing to the failure of Sinn Féin.

3.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for Questions to the Minister of Education — *[Interruption.]* Perhaps, the Minister will give a short answer.

Mr Storey: In English.

The Minister of Education: Is féidir liom an teanga a phiocadh. I can choose which language I speak. I may even answer in Spanish.

I welcome the Member's belated concern about the postcode lottery. I have listened to Members talking about that, and, no matter how admissions criteria are introduced — preferably through the Executive — I will introduce criteria for socially disadvantaged children. I look forward to the support of all Members who have spoken to me about a postcode lottery, because I wish to ensure that the inequality in the system is eliminated, so that working-class children will cease to be disadvantaged.

The Member will know that, on 15 May, I brought proposals to the Executive, but the Executive refused to discuss them. I want to present proposals to the Executive. However, all parties must understand that if the Executive — a North/South, British-Irish power-sharing arrangement — are to work together, they must act on the basis of equality and partnership.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

US Visit

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what outcomes were achieved following his recent visit to the United States. (AQO 738/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): During my visit, I spoke to many business people about opportunities for further collaboration between Northern Ireland education establishments and their equivalents in the United States. In addition, I met the vice president of the National Centre for Technological Literacy, Yvonne Spicer, and her team from the Museum of Science in Boston. They have developed and pioneered teaching programmes for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects throughout all 50 states.

The Museum of Science offered to share its teaching materials and experience with Northern Ireland, and I will discuss that initiative with the Minister of Education in the context of our review of STEM-subject provision in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gardiner: In the Minister's discussions with the Americans, did the subjects of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act 2008, or new GI Bill, come up?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes, they did come up. I met Ms Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education — the organisation that represents the university system in the United States. In addition, I met Senator Jim Webb from Virginia, who was the author of the new GI Bill. Both conversations impressed greatly on me the role that education and skills — particularly higher-level skills — can play in reintegrating former military personnel into civilian society and in developing a vibrant economy.

Furthermore, I was impressed by the level of investment that the United States Government are making in those who have returned from military service in order to ensure that they have an opportunity to re-skill and up-skill, and so make the fullest possible contribution to their national economy.

Mr Newton: During his visit to the United States, did the Minister gain an understanding of the relationship between the education system and the business community? Did he learn anything from observing that relationship, and is there anything that might be brought back to enhance the Northern Ireland education system, particularly in the area of vocational skills?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes. I visited an organisation called CARE that is sponsored by the private sector. CARE is a Peace-Corps-type operation, in which people spend time particularly with children from disadvantaged communities. That organisation is predominately sponsored by the private sector and local states. Furthermore, in the United States, there is much greater collaboration between the business and education sectors than there is here.

We should try to encourage that. The business community realises the significance of engaging, at an

earlier stage, with elements of the education sector in securing the long-term provision of labour supply.

Furthermore, as a result of changing demographics in the United States, that country is in a tougher position than Northern Ireland in relation to essential skills. A large proportion of the workforce — some 39 million people — do not have fundamental, essential skills. That figure is growing, which is one reason that the GI Bill was introduced in order to ensure that that section of the community achieves the necessary level of skills.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given what the Minister has said, will he confirm that any proposed investment to help to reduce unemployment — particularly for those with essential skills problems — will be targeted specifically at areas of multiple deprivation?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is a strong link between educational underachievement and areas of significant deprivation. We need only look around our own Province for evidence of that. The two issues are undoubtedly related, so the solutions must also be related.

Sadly, in areas that are deemed to be more affluent, there are pockets in which the same problems arise. Unfortunately, the criteria that were used — such as the Noble indices — were blunt instruments, which excluded pockets in which individuals had learning difficulties. The improvement of essential skills must be open to all, irrespective of geographical area. There is a link — albeit not 100% — and areas of social and economic deprivation have more educational underachievement than other areas.

Practical Works within the Community

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration he has given to implementing a module on practical works within the community for courses delivered by further education colleges on providing public services, similar to the practical work in the community carried out by the Prince's Trust. (AQO 744/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Prince's Trust team programme, which involves participants undertaking a community project as part of the course, is currently delivered in all six further education colleges. Colleges provide the training element of the programme, which is funded by my Department.

The further education (FE) colleges are responsible for setting their own course provision for implementing a module on practical works within the community, including the practical work.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. To those Members who are aware of the Prince's Trust, it is obvious that it carries out marvellous work and provides opportunities to young boys and girls who particularly need help. I had hoped that the Minister would provide an assurance that further work in the Prince's Trust will be unfolded in all FE colleges and that courses currently being undertaken could be developed to involve more young people.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have made it my business to meet representatives of the Prince's Trust. I have attended four events and have examined its work.

The Prince's Trust team programme is provided with a range of delivery partners, including the FE colleges. The programme has been designed by the Prince's Trust to target hard-to-reach, socially excluded and marginalised young people between the ages 16 and 25. Some of the programmes are quite expensive, but they are exceptional, which is why I support them.

As the Member will be aware, the training component of the team programme is, typically, delivered by the FE colleges, and the cost is met from the recurrent funding that is allocated to the colleges by my Department. The team programme has been running since 2006, and feedback has been positive. The colleges have indicated that over 84% of the participants who complete the programme progress into further study, training or employment. Therefore, I can give the Member the assurance that he seeks.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin.

Does the Minister agree that, although courses delivered by the colleges and the Prince's Trust are beneficial to the community, attention should be focused on the delivery of courses that provide qualifications for high-value, knowledge-based jobs for those who are involved in those types of activities? If we are to compete in the economy, does the Minister agree that his emphasis and focus should be on the delivery of high-value jobs, so that we are not vulnerable to people from other countries taking our jobs? That is particularly pertinent in the current economic climate. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand what the Member says. However, much as I would like to focus on the high-value-added jobs that he refers to, many people in large swathes of our community — including the Member's constituency, as he will know — are not yet at the stage where they can benefit from, and exploit, some of the higher-value-added qualifications.

We must take a twin-track approach to the issue. On the one hand — and considering the current

circumstances — we must concentrate on the skills that are relevant to the knowledge-based economy into which we are moving. That requires investment, not only in the higher grades of vocational training, but right through the higher-education sector. Alongside that, a large swathe of our population does not have basic essential skills. Pertinent to that, and to Mr Shannon's question, is that the Prince's Trust concentrates on reaching those harder-to-get-at clients — as do other community-based organisations.

The process, therefore, must be twin-tracked; we must go after both groups of people, because those without the essential skills cannot be progressed into the more productive end of the economy — and the areas in which there is more potential — if they do not have the basic qualifications. In 2020, it is estimated that only 2% of the available jobs will be unskilled compared to the current figure of 17.5%. The Member will see that we have a long way to go.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answers; he has almost blown away my questions in his replies to previous questions. How can the Department for Employment and Learning and the Prince's Trust work together to expand the programme further to try and reach the individuals whom he mentioned in his response to the previous supplementary question — the young people on the fringes, who require to be brought in?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Prince's Trust, in common with several voluntary organisations, specialises in a harder-to-reach client. It is therefore not unique in that; however, we have looked at one or two of the courses that the Prince's Trust runs, and, although the cost per client is higher — significantly so in one case — we must take whatever steps are necessary if we are to stop people from falling behind. I, therefore, support, unashamedly, what the Prince's Trust does, although I acknowledge that it is not the only organisation that follows such a path.

As Members know, there are particular clients who, simply, will not turn up at a college of further education. One has to go to the doors of those people, and they have to gain some confidence, because, perhaps, they suffer from a lack of self-esteem. All of that costs money, but it is fundamental to our attempt to improve our community and to bring as many people as possible into our society to make them economically active and productive. It is expensive, but it is money well spent.

New Deal: Derry/Londonderry

4. **Mr McCartney** 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. (AQO 790/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The contract for Steps to Work in the Foyle contract area has not been awarded. The procurement process is ongoing. All tenders for the Steps to Work programme were assessed against the criteria of methodology, relevant experience and capacity to deliver, and broken into sub-criteria.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin.

Will the Minister outline why it was necessary to rerun the tendering process after A4e was awarded preferred-bidder status?

3.15 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member must bear in mind that the process is ongoing and, while that is the case, I must be careful about what I say. The procurement process has not been concluded in two remaining areas. New bids have been received for the Foyle area and those will be assessed shortly, and further information has been received for the north-west. However, the process is ongoing in the Foyle area, and I am unable to say anything further.

Mr Durkan: I understand the constraints that the Minister has referred to. However, on the wider aspect of the Steps to Work programme, the Minister must be aware that many people believe that the Central Procurement Directorate appears to be acting to some sort of imperative to ensure that outside players are successfully brought into the market. Rightly or wrongly, that is the impression that people have.

How far are the decisions on methodology, relevant experience and capacity to deliver taken by his Department, and how far are they taken by the Central Procurement Directorate, which may have little experience in that area?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand through correspondence and other contacts that the Member has a keen interest in the matter. The Central Procurement Directorate is not attempting to ensure that outside people are brought in. Having agreed the terms of reference for the contracts with my Department, the Central Procurement Directorate must implement those terms of reference and assess the bids that have been made. If that results in someone who is not based here being awarded a contract, that is within European Union rules and regulations. There is no predisposition to ensure that someone from outside is awarded a contract, any more than there is a predisposition to award a contract to a local firm. If the process is to be fair and open, it must be based on objective criteria, which is why we hand over the

process to the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), which has the expertise to deal with the situation.

The Department's role is, primarily, to set out what is required. As a former Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Member knows that the CPD's role is to ensure that proper and due process is followed correctly.

National Minimum Wage

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what input he provided to the recent Low Pay Commission Review of the National Minimum Wage. (AQO 737/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In addition to providing a contribution to the co-ordinated Northern Ireland submission to the chairman of the Low Pay Commission, I wrote to him on 1 October drawing attention to the position of apprentices who currently have no minimum wage. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some cases, the wages earned are insufficient to cover the basic cost of living and, if that continues, it will lead to a decrease in the number of apprenticeships being completed, which will have a detrimental impact on the economy. I have recommended, therefore, that the Low Pay Commission gives consideration to a minimum rate of pay for all apprentices in Northern Ireland and that that should be in line with what is required in England.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his comforting reply. However, do apprentices in other parts of the UK earn different remuneration?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Obviously, there is a difference between here and Great Britain because, as I said, there is no minimum wage here. However, as I understand it, an apprentice can earn a minimum of £80 a week in England. The difficulty is that people believe that apprentices are not given a reasonable basic minimum wage level. Several Members have referred to that fact, and it has also been raised in debates. Due to the circumstances of apprenticeships, it is outside the current normal regulations. In England, the current minimum rate of pay is £80 a week. However, from 2009, that figure will increase to £95 a week.

Under those circumstances, I was right to contact the Low Pay Commission — and I said in previous debates that I would do so. There was a consensus in the House that it was unsatisfactory for apprentices to be left in that position. I hope that the commission's response will be positive. I appreciate that we do not wish to burden businesses any more than is necessary; however, we must balance that concern with concerns about the ability to attract people to undertake apprenticeships that offer them very little money on which to live.

Mr Irwin: What is the Minister's view on the Low Pay Commission's recommendation that 21-year-olds should be entitled to the adult rate of the national minimum wage?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: That is one of the issues that I look forward to the Low Pay Commission addressing. At the moment, there is no guidance — wages are a matter for the apprentice and the employer to work out between them. However, that arrangement has led to some young people receiving very small amounts of money that are inadequate to live on. We accept that being an apprentice is different from being a fully qualified employee. However, I am content to wait for the commission's recommendations, and I intend to bring details of them to the House when they are published, as Members have expressed an interest in the matter in recent debates.

Mr Dallat: It is comforting to hear the Minister talk about the construction industry, given the sorry mess that it is in. Can he tell us why a policy on the minimum wage has been so slow to emerge? Furthermore, how many apprentices are there in the construction industry, and what is being done to encourage young people to continue to express an interest in that important industry?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member's last question is about a subject that is different from the subject of the main question. However, that has never stopped the Member asking such a question in the past, and, no doubt, it will not stand in his way in the future.

All joking aside, the situation is very serious. Large numbers of apprentices have lost their positions, and my Department is urgently considering what it will do to address that matter. Many of those apprentices are part of the way through their apprenticeships — they have gained only some of the necessary qualifications and are now being put out of their posts. We must decide what to do with those young people. The Department may have to intervene. I am considering that option at the moment, and I will be happy to bring my conclusion to the House in due course.

How did we get into this position? It appears that a gap has emerged. As Members know, the issue of low pay is dealt with nationally, but apprenticeships seem to be one of the issues that have fallen through the cracks. I do not know the legal or technical reasons for that, but I am happy to send a letter to the Member to clarify the matter. However, when the problem was brought to my attention, I acted to address it. I have put forward a positive case — based, in part, on Members' contributions to recent debates — and I look forward to a positive outcome.

The Department is examining concerns about the construction industry as a matter of urgency, and I hope that we can present some proposals before too long. However, any solution will be neither easy nor cheap.

Teacher Education in a Climate of Change

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the progress of the 'Teacher Education in a Climate of Change' review, commissioned by his Department and the Department of Education in April 2003. (AQO 806/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Officials in my Department and in the Department of Education are finalising a draft policy framework paper, which will be submitted for consideration to the Minister of Education and me in the next few weeks. The timescale for the completion of the review from that point onwards will be determined by several factors, including consideration by the relevant departmental Committees, other Ministers and the Executive.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, although the fact that the issue depends on the Executive's taking action should not give us any grounds for optimism at the moment. Over the past year or so, the Assembly has held several debates on teacher training, and the number of teacher-training places is of real concern. Given that, can the Minister tell us whether the long delay on this matter has hampered his Department's ability to produce a strategic plan for teacher education?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is correct that the delay in the process has not been Government's finest hour. It had been hoped that the review would be published shortly after a conference in 2005. However, that coincided with announcements on the review of public administration and George Bain's independent strategic review of education. Those significant policy issues and matters relating to the funding model had to be reflected in the final document.

The issue is cross-cutting and involves at least two — probably three — Departments. The guidance is that Ministers cannot act unilaterally in such matters. Therefore, I am required to agree with the Minister of Education — and possibly other Ministers — to bring a proposal to the Executive for it to be made Executive policy. That has not happened for obvious reasons.

I assure the Member that I regularly raise the matter of the review's completion with senior officials. We are acutely aware of the concerns about initial teacher education. The delay is one of the worst that is being experienced. It is not a pretty picture, and I and my Department want an urgent conclusion. I read an earlier draft of the review some time ago, and it contained

some high-quality work. I hope that the Member will think the same when it is eventually published.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister outline the level of co-operation on the review that he has received from the Education Minister? What information has the Department of Education shared with the Department for Employment and Learning to aid the Minister's decisions on the new funding models for Stranmillis and St Mary's university colleges?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The teacher-education review that Mr Ford's question referred to is a collaborative effort. We work closely with officials from the Department of Education. The Minister of Education and I have corresponded on matters pertaining to the report. We must agree the final content, and we will.

The Member will be aware that the number of initial teacher-education training places is determined by the Minister of Education. I determine the number of non-teacher-education courses that are delivered in colleges. My Department also provides resources for colleges to operate on both initial teacher-education places and non-initial teacher-education places. The Department of Education usually gives me an indication of those numbers in January of each year. When I receive that indication, I will bring it to the House's attention.

Mr Attwood: I agree that this is not the Government's finest hour. Indeed, it is a sorry state of affairs that — for four years before Mr Empey became a Minister, and for 18 months since — two Government Departments have not been able to complete the review.

Is there not a tension between the Minister's assertion that he and the Department of Education cannot act unilaterally on a review of teacher training, and the fact that Stranmillis University College and Queen's University acted unilaterally and tried to bounce the rest of us into agreeing to the merger proposal?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: That was very well done — the Member for East Londonderry will have to try harder. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Attwood knows that when it comes to a cross-cutting issue, it is desirable for the Departments concerned to work together and reach a conclusion. It is also desirable that those conclusions be made Executive policy, so that it becomes a Government-wide issue; otherwise, people head off on tangents.

3.30 pm

To answer the Member's second point, Stranmillis University College and Queen's University can come together, but that does not constitute a decision on their part. They can make a recommendation, but it is up to the House to determine the outcome.

Queen's University and Stranmillis University College have promised me an economic appraisal that will be to the Treasury's green book standards. I was due to receive that at the end of July 2008, but I am yet to receive it. When I receive it, I will have to study it, as will the Department of Finance and Personnel. If, on reaching a conclusion, we feel minded to go along with the proposal, a Bill will be prepared. That Bill will be subject to the full legislative process of the House. As I have said many times, I have no plans or intention for that Bill to proceed by accelerated passage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 7 and question 8 have been withdrawn.

Community Education

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans there are to accommodate the continuity of community education without the burden of accreditation and additional costs associated with Further Education Colleges. (AQO 801/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department's priority is to encourage learners to follow courses that lead to qualifications that are accredited on the national qualifications framework. Such provision meets stringent quality criteria, the needs of employers and learners, and is recognised by employers and educational establishments at home and abroad, thereby enabling learners' progression. However, I recognise that courses that are not on the national qualifications framework meet the needs of some learners; for example, some older learners and some people with learning difficulties or disabilities. Therefore, I confirm that around 5% of college provision that my Department funds will go on courses that are not on the national qualifications framework.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy/PPS 18

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has met with the Minister of the Environment to discuss renewable energy and PPS 18. (AQO 764/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): On 23 September, the Minister of the Environment and I met to discuss those matters. As the Member knows, renewable-energy development is a highly important objective for my Department, and for Northern Ireland as a whole, if we are to reduce our exposure to the supply uncertainties and price

volatility that are associated with the current energy market. In that regard, planning policy statement (PPS) 18 is helpful in reducing barriers to the development of renewable energy by adopting a presumption in favour of wind generation.

Our meeting particularly focused on the proposed supplementary guidance to PPS 18, which is intended to ensure that adequate protection be given to our valuable landscape through the appropriate siting of wind turbines. As with so many such considerations, it will be important to strike a balance between security and sustainability of our energy supply with affordability and environmental protection.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she believe that energy policy, either through the Department of the Environment or the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, should accommodate and promote local community and domestically based energy provision more than a larger, centralised model of energy provision?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We want all those types of energy provision. My Department has promoted domestic energy, but we also know that, in order to meet our European Union targets, a step change is needed on renewable energy. Therefore, we are firmly considering new tidal renewable energy; we have initiated a strategic environmental assessment on it. We are working with the wind industry to determine what more can be done with that type of energy. We want everyone to play their part when it comes to using renewable energy in future.

Mr Ford: The Minister referred to a presumption in favour of wind energy under PPS 18, but several people in the industry say that the supplementary guidance, of which she may have had some knowledge in her previous occupation, provides a presumption against wind energy in a large portion of Northern Ireland. Has the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment taken any view on the necessity of ensuring that wind energy is not developed merely in two or three tiny areas but is available for the benefit of Northern Ireland on a wider scale?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I take it from that that the Member wants us to move outside of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I assure him that we will. On a more serious note, PPS 18 has a presumption in favour of wind energy, but the Member is right to say that there have been difficulties with the supplementary planning guidance. I stress to him that, as its name suggests, that is guidance, not the planning policy.

I am aware of ongoing discussions and negotiations within the industry and between officials in my

Department and their counterparts in the Department of the Environment. The Member knows that turbine height appears to be the biggest problem. The guidance has a specific remit in relation to that issue. I want a degree of flexibility on turbine heights. I know that those discussions are continuing and I hope that they will bear fruit.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister will be aware of a recent debate on climate change, and I assume that she does not necessarily share the views of her colleague, the Minister of the Environment. There was broad agreement across the Chamber that one of the ways to encourage the use of renewable energy was to use grants as a carrot approach, as well as using a stick. Will the Minister outline what incentives her Department proposes to offer industries to encourage them to use renewable energy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The main way that renewable energy is incentivised is through the Northern Ireland renewables obligation: that will continue. Indeed, there will be a consultation about it very soon. Scotland is also considering the issue, and what it consults on must tie in with what we do, in particular, in relation to tidal resources. It would be out of step for Scotland to offer more renewables obligation certificates for tidal energy than Northern Ireland. It will be important that there is joined-up Government between Northern Ireland and Scotland in that regard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

All-Ireland Economy

3. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her strategy to develop an all-Ireland economy. (AQO 752/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department works with the Republic of Ireland in areas that are mutually beneficial and in situations in which there is a sound economic basis for so doing. Recent events have shown that there is now a global economy and that it is important to develop strong economic links with the rest of the world and not focus solely on our closest neighbour.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for that answer.

The Minister recently announced an independent review of economic policy. The terms of reference were given to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, they contain only one small reference to North/South. They also mention the Varney Review, which contained a number of

submissions about an all-Ireland economy and about the development of a joined-up approach, in particular, between development agencies in the North and in the South and with the Irish Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr Butler: In the present economic climate, what is the Minister doing to ensure that those links — particularly between IDA Ireland and Invest NI — are strengthened?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I believe that the Member is referring to the terms of reference for the review of Invest NI and economic policy. It is a consequence of the Varney Review and of the need to examine that area, and the Department is happy to do so. As the Member said, the terms of reference have been shared with the Committee and I look forward to its response on the remit and terms of reference.

As I said in my answer to the Member's preliminary question, Northern Ireland is operating in a global economy, and it would be very short-sighted to put all our focus on looking southwards. At present, the border actually makes good economic sense for people living in Northern Ireland because the recent decline in sterling against the Euro helps improve the competitiveness of local exports. Thirty per cent of Northern Ireland's sales outside the UK go to the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, the border helps companies in Northern Ireland to export their goods. I hope that that will offset some of the negative impacts that companies face due to the present global and national economic situation.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister knows that all indications are that the Northern Ireland economy will grow this year, albeit by a small amount. However, I was reminded at the weekend that J K Galbraith said:

"The only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology look respectable."

What analysis has her Department carried out on the effect of the recession on the once Celtic tiger economy of the South, and how will it affect Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Although things have been going well for us and the economy has been growing over the past 10 years, we will face a downturn, as will most economies; however, we are not officially in a recession. According to forecasts that have been given to my Department, the economy will continue to grow next year, albeit at a very slow rate; but it is still growth and we should take some comfort from that. I have always been of the opinion that we must not talk ourselves into a recession, but rather that we should deal with the realities of Northern Ireland's economy. Therefore, there will be growth next year, albeit a small amount.

Mr Armstrong: In the light of the downturn in the economic situation in the Republic of Ireland, does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland is in a far stronger economic position while it remains joined to the rest of the United Kingdom — the fifth-largest economy in the world — than would be the case if we were in an all-Ireland arrangement? Does she agree that North/South economic activity is important, but it can never be at the expense of a United Kingdom linkage?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The short answer is yes. GB remains the destination for most of our external sales, some 55%. When we talk about “North/Southerly”, it is important to remember that the east-west links remain the most important to Northern Ireland’s economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

Global Economic Downturn

6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what implications the global economic downturn will have on the Programme for Government’s target of 300 companies exporting to Great Britain. (AQO 718/09)

Global Economic Downturn

10. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what implications the global economic downturn will have on the Programme for Government’s target of 45 new business start-ups exporting outside the United Kingdom. (AQO 717/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 10 together. The economic environment is much more challenging than it has been for some time, making it exceptionally difficult to forecast with any degree of confidence. With the slowdown in the global economy reflecting turbulence in the financial markets, there are inevitable implications for the wider regional economy.

The Programme for Government’s target of 300 businesses exporting to Great Britain relates to the next three years up to 2011. The target for the current year is 100 businesses, against which Invest NI has assisted 40 new businesses to date, and work is ongoing with a further 30 entrepreneurs. Similarly, a three-year target has been set for 45 new business start-ups exporting outside the UK. Against this year’s target of 15 new business start-ups, Invest NI has supported seven to date, and the pipeline of prospective cases is quite healthy, with ongoing discussions involving 12 potential new businesses.

Although Invest NI’s performance in the first half of the year has been largely on track, the prevailing conditions will inevitably make achieving those three-year targets much more challenging, particularly as they begin to affect the ability of start-up and small businesses to grow outside Northern Ireland. Against that, the Northern Ireland value proposition for foreign direct investment remains strong.

Invest NI continues to target companies wishing to avail of well-qualified and talented people in a cost-competitive, pro-business operating environment that is both culturally compatible and close to its customers. That approach has been very successful to date, with the software sector in particular achieving rapid growth. Employment in the sector has grown by more than 60% since 2002, reaching 13,000 in 2004. Forecasts predict that by 2021, the sector in Northern Ireland will employ about 20,000 people.

Software companies continue to invest here despite the current climate. Last week, for example, I announced that north American telecommunications company BTI Systems Inc is establishing a £6 million European headquarters in Northern Ireland. That investment, which is supported by Invest NI, will promote 60 high-quality software engineering jobs, generating more than £2.2 million annually in wages and salaries for the local economy.

Invest NI’s existing client companies also benefit significantly from its ongoing market visit programme, which encourages and supports opportunities to begin, as first-time exporters, to expand their presence in existing overseas markets or to enter new ones. Invest NI’s programme for the current year is particularly comprehensive, offering clients the opportunity to explore business opportunities in more than 20 countries worldwide. Therefore, I assure the Member that, against this difficult economic backdrop, Invest NI is continuing to work extensively with companies and entrepreneurs whose business strategies and investment decisions are essential to progressing towards the targets in the Executive’s Programme for Government.

3.45 pm

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Are there any other strategies that she can put in place in order to assist small and medium-sized businesses, which are the backbone of our economy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I concur with the Member; those businesses are the backbone of our economy. My Department has taken several actions, in conjunction with Invest NI, to help companies to manage the economic downturn in response to the current circumstances. For example, Invest NI held two awareness seminars at the end of September 2008 in Belfast and Cookstown to offer

specialist advice to businesses. I attended the Belfast event and announced a £5 million accelerated support fund, which offers fast-track advice and assistance to businesses that are feeling the impact of the current economic circumstances on their competitiveness.

Cash flow is one of the biggest issues for our small indigenous companies. The fund also provides companies with an opportunity to take up five days' free on-site diagnostic support. Businesses can tap into the £5 million fund for particular projects that will help them to get over the current economic difficulties.

I was pleased with the number of businesses that attended those events. From what I have heard, they are working very well.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline what new initiatives she has proposed in talks with the Minister of Finance and Personnel that will help small businesses in this time of economic crisis?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As well as the £5 million that was made available to Invest NI, which I have just mentioned, £4.9 million was made available to the Carbon Trust in order to deal with energy efficiency. Not surprisingly, energy prices are still a huge issue for some of our small companies and, indeed, for some of our larger companies. That money was well spent, and, as I said in reply to a question from the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, if there is a need to re-examine that funding, I will be happy to do so.

I am sometimes asked about what is being done for companies that are not Invest NI clients. My Department has added a new section to the nibusinessinfo.co.uk website, entitled 'Beat the Credit Crunch', which provides practical advice and guidance on managing finance and taking steps to improving efficiency. Members would do well to look at that website, because it is comprehensive and contains a great deal of good advice for businesses. However, I have made it clear that, if there is a need to advertise that website, I will be happy to do so.

Mr Durkan: The Minister has anticipated one part of my question with regard to non-INI client companies, and I am glad to hear that that matter will be kept under review. In the context of the global downturn, will the Minister, her Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel examine the circumstances of many businesses that are being levied with rates charges for empty properties? In many cases, those properties are empty not as a result of any calculation on the part of the business concerned to bank property or to blight areas for others but simply because market conditions dictate that they do not have the tenants or the business to occupy those premises.

The impact of the additional rates burden on empty properties is making a difference for some businesses in the choices that they are making with regard to payrolls. Will the Minister address that issue?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his comments. Invest NI and the Department are conscious of the importance, and the impact, of global economic conditions and the effect that the situation is having on the decisions that businesspeople have to make for their companies. Companies are tightening their belts and increasing their focus on cost containment. If Mr Durkan sets out his concerns in more detail, I will be happy to have a discussion with him.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has very helpfully addressed the point that I was going to make, but I want to press a particular issue. In noting the original question, I welcome the fact that there were no sounds of heads falling off when exporting from here to Great Britain was mentioned. My point focuses on the small and medium-sized enterprises and the social economy enterprises. Will the Minister go a step further than she has indicated, by ensuring that equal focus and attention is given to those sectors, given the global economic downturn? Those sectors have been the stable part of the economy and, in the current circumstances, represent the best chance of growing the economy.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. I was very pleased to attend the Bryson Charitable Group's AGM this year, at which there was talk about growth and more employment for that sector — therefore, the social economy is very important to my Department. A draft social economy strategy will, I think this week, be sent to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for consideration. It is vitally important that we deal with that sector because, when we are in difficult times, it is often that sector that grows, and, therefore, I appreciate the value of it.

Home Tourism Market

7. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the current downturn in the economy, what plans the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has to focus on the home market to encourage potential holiday makers to stay and holiday in Northern Ireland. (AQO 720/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) undertakes a year-round calendar of activities to promote Northern Ireland to both the domestic and Republic of Ireland

markets through a series of marketing campaigns and PR. In 2008 NITB ran a campaign solely targeted at the domestic market. It included press advertising, leaflet distribution, PR and web promotion, all designed to encourage Northern Ireland residents to take a holiday or day trip at home. NITB has also just launched an autumn campaign in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland which will run until the Christmas period, and will include press advertising, web promotion, radio, outdoor advertising, direct mail and PR.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's answer. I further stress the importance of this issue, and ask the Minister to make sure that all is being done to promote Northern Ireland in light of the economic downturn, so that residents of Northern Ireland can explore the natural beauty of our countryside and enjoy our inland waterways and, especially, our hospitality, particularly in south Down.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was wondering when the advertisement would sneak in, but there it is. NITB is aware of the potential of the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland markets — it is an issue that I have raised directly with that organisation. It has recently conducted a review of those areas, which demonstrated that there was potential in both the Republic of Ireland market and the home market in Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland is a major source of untapped growth potential, and that is a job for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, as we develop the five signature projects, in one of which I know that the Member will be particularly interested. We are pressing ahead with all five of those projects.

Mr Shannon: It is always a pleasure to go to south Down, and it is even more of a pleasure to go through Strangford to get there. Has the Minister any plans to change the delivery of tourism at a local level in light of the changes proposed in the review of public administration (RPA), due to be implemented in 2011?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I rarely go through Strangford to get to Newry and Mourne, but I will try it the next time to see if it is a better route. The Member mentioned the RPA, and he will know my view, given my previous ministerial position, that it is vitally important to achieve the buy-in of the new local councils in relation to issues such as tourism. It is an area that I am currently considering, to see how we can improve the buy-in of local people and local councils. I recently had the opportunity to attend a very good tourism conference hosted by Newry and Mourne District Council, and I hope that there will be more such buy-ins by the local councils in the future. It is certainly an area that I want to explore.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response to Mr McCallister, who mentioned south Down.

I ask the Minister for reassurance that County Tyrone and in particular areas of west Tyrone, including the Glenelly Valley, Omagh, Gortin and Greencastle, will get their fair share of promotion by NITB. I ask that question because I have raised that issue and will raise it again with NITB. I seek reassurance from the Minister that those areas will get their fair share of promotion, because my constituents have raised that issue.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: This is rapidly becoming a tour around Northern Ireland. The Member knows where I am from and, therefore, my position on the issue. I assure her that all parts of Northern Ireland must get their fair share of promotion, because each part of Northern Ireland offers a different product, quality and experience to tourists. The five signature projects remain the driver for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and the Member will be aware of them. Although a signature project is not located right beside west Tyrone, the area will see the benefit of those projects. Fermanagh, where I live, should have had its own signature project, and although it does not have one, I believe that it will see the benefit of them.

I mentioned local government and councils because they will have an increasing role to play in tourism. I hope that Members will encourage their councils to become involved in any measure that we propose.

Credit Unions

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when she will take forward proposals to provide credit unions with the same financial powers as their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and England. (AQO 757/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Assembly's Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is undertaking an inquiry into "The Role and Potential of Credit Unions, and Opportunities and Barriers in Northern Ireland".

My Department has provided briefing papers to the Committee on the regulatory framework that is applied under transferred powers in respect of credit unions in Northern Ireland. Likewise, the Financial Services Authority has provided a paper, including briefing on the legislative and regulatory framework that applies in the United Kingdom.

I plan to await the outcome of the inquiry and will give full and careful consideration to the Committee's views and recommendations in due course.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. With respect, the Minister's tour could not be complete without mentioning Newry and Armagh. I declare an interest as a member of Newry credit union. In light of the economic downturn, does the Minister think that financial powers should be expedited, particularly in light of people's problems in accessing credit from banks?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At present, there is no evidence to suggest that the financial environment is having an adverse effect on the credit union movement in Northern Ireland. The Department and I put on record our appreciation of the role and the work of credit unions throughout Northern Ireland. I am aware that there was a particular issue about the Member's credit union; however, I understand that that issue has been resolved. I hope that that credit union and all the others in Northern Ireland will continue to provide their service to the community.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for her recognition of the work of credit unions. The tour has finally arrived in Lagan Valley. Will the Minister outline the number of credit unions in Northern Ireland and detail how much credit is outstanding in the credit union system?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: One hundred and eighty credit unions are registered in Northern Ireland, and they have a total of £740 million in deposits and £490 million in loans. That is not a bad position in which to be. At present, the maximum amount that credit unions can loan is £15,000. That may not seem like much, but it provides a useful service to many communities. However, the average loan is around £3,000. Therefore, credit unions provide a very good service to their communities.

4.00 pm

Mr Cree: Will the Minister outline her plans to introduce public funding for credit unions in Northern Ireland in line with the situation in Great Britain?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not aware that credit unions in Great Britain receive public funding. However, they are regulated by the Financial Services Authority, which does not happen here. Likewise, the recent change in the Republic of Ireland means that credit union branches there are included in the state deposit guarantees. Therefore, Northern Ireland is the only area in the British Isles that is not covered by a statutory scheme, which is something that the ETI Committee will report to me on. I await its report, which I understand I will receive in the near future.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Strategy to Promote Safety in Communities

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly calls for an inter-departmental, multi-disciplinary strategy, informed by the Patten report and the Criminal Justice Review report 2000, to include proposals on alcohol-related crime and prolific offenders, aimed at reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities, to be led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. — [Mr Adams.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"recognises that offending and anti-social behaviour is often the result of unmet, complex social, educational and health needs; and calls for an inter-departmental, cross-sectional strategy, led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, that ensures safer communities by addressing issues of poverty, poor health, low educational achievement and lack of community and public resources." — [Ms Purvis.]

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Alcohol-related crime, drug-related crime and antisocial behaviour have already left a scar on all our communities. For many households, crime of that nature is one of the major issues that they want elected representatives to address, because it constitutes a direct threat to homes, families and communities. My colleague from West Belfast Mr Gerry Adams outlined several examples of good practice in community justice and making communities safer in other parts of Ireland and across the water. I will refer to an example in Scotland.

Earlier this year, political representatives from all the main parties on the Policing Board, and independent members who are on the board, went to Edinburgh to meet the Minister responsible for policing and justice in Scotland, Kenny MacAskill. The trip was very informative and highlighted the potential of having policing and justice powers in this institution.

Several politicians have said recently that policing and justice is not a major issue for our communities. That is the wrong position to take, because it is the number one issue in many of our communities, alongside, if not above, the economic downturn.

Kieran McCarthy from the Alliance Party referred to drugs in Glasgow. The Scottish Administration have taken that issue by the horns and have used their initiative by providing the courts with drug treatment and testing orders to deal with offenders who are involved in serious drug misuse. That has delivered results and has eliminated re-offending among 50% of those who have participated. Drugs courts were also introduced in Scotland, which have been held up as models of good practice and have been copied in many countries throughout Europe.

The recent debate on the sale of alcohol to people under 21 has caused a stir in Scotland, but at least the Scottish Administration have the power to debate the issue to the best of their ability. We cannot have that debate to its fullest potential here until we have powers of policing and justice, which will make a radical difference to our communities. Dealing with policing and justice issues is not something to put on the back burner, because our communities will suffer as a result.

A properly thought-out strategy that examines community safety with clear lines of responsibility is required. The existing situation, with community safety partnerships on the one hand, and district policing partnerships on the other, is ridiculous. The responsibilities of both groups should be brought together into a single model.

We heard today, and in many debates over the past few weeks, about the economic downturn and how it affects all Departments in the Assembly. The downturn will have a major affect on crime, and increasing unemployment and poverty. Therefore, there needs to be a greater urgency to the debate about addressing community safety now in order to prepare for, and to prevent, an increase in crime against the community. There is no doubt that crime will increase over the next year or two as a result of the economic and social consequences of the economic downturn.

It is nonsense to suggest that people are not interested in policing and justice. For example, I am sure that members of the public would have far preferred local politicians to have dealt with the matter of 50% remission for sex offenders, rather than direct rule Ministers, who made a mess of the issue. If that had been in the hands of local politicians, we would have dealt with it much more efficiently and with greater urgency.

Therefore, it is not, as the Ulster Unionists suggested, premature to discuss this issue, because it affects the lives of all our constituents, and no elected representative should neglect that fact. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Purvis: The debate has been wide ranging, and possibly the widest interpretation of a motion that I have heard. A number of cross-cutting issues emerged. Nelson McCausland spoke of the issues being societal and related to family, community and the legacy of the conflict. Danny Kennedy said that the motion was unclear, but that it was justice-focused.

Alex Attwood said that there was a need for a multidisciplinary and interdepartmental approach, and outlined the problems with a key element of the criminal justice system, namely, the Public Prosecution Service. I wonder what Kieran McCarthy will do when he has no more paramilitaries to blame.

Jim Shannon spoke about the issues in his constituency, and how they need to be addressed by

education programmes that provide options for young people. That goes to the heart of the amendment, which is about addressing the causes of offending behaviour through support, advice and co-ordination.

Martina Anderson talked about individual cases and difficulties with the criminal justice system. However, looking at the criminal justice system alone will not deal with the causes of harmful behaviour. What is needed is a multi-departmental approach.

Other Members spoke about Sinn Féin and the devolution of policing and justice, the need for support for the police and the rule of law. That is not in question. However, the criminal justice system and the police will not resolve the issues. They are complex; offending behaviour comes from unmet needs that are the root cause of harmful, offending behaviour in the community.

The Assembly can give a lead and assist the criminal justice system and the PSNI by developing and implementing an interdepartmental, cross-sectoral strategy in order to address the causes of offending behaviour. We heard from Members about how Departments can play their role with regard to education, social development and health. The criminal justice system cannot do that on its own.

The motion does not go far enough. It looks at punitive measures and not at the causes. If we do not start to address the causes of harmful, offending behaviour, we are stacking it up for ever. The criminal justice system cannot do this on its own, but the Assembly can.

I support the amendment.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all those Members who participated in the debate. I thank, too, those who tabled the motion, and Dawn Purvis for proposing an amendment.

Dawn Purvis's contribution in support of her amendment echoed the contributions of Members from all other parties, which show that the Assembly is conscious that those interrelated difficulties depend on other factors in order to be tackled effectively.

The motion calls for an interdepartmental and multidisciplinary strategy that is informed by the Patten Report and the Criminal Justice Review report. The strategy must include proposals to deal with alcohol-related crime and prolific offenders. Essentially, its aim is to reduce harm and to promote safety in local communities. It calls for that particular strategy to be led by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

When Gerry Adams moved the motion, he made it clear that he endorses and supports fully the amendment's intention. However, although it is not its intention the amendment goes, unfortunately, in the

opposite direction to the motion. It makes no reference whatsoever to the criminal justice system.

My party's concern, and an acute concern of everyone in the community, is that, often, the public equates rehabilitative work with young people and support for families with the lack of an assurance that a punishment will fit a crime or that there will be sanctions for people who become a burden to their communities. Therefore, the Assembly must not, through adopting the amendment, send out the wrong message, which is that it does not recognise the need for appropriate sanctions to be taken against people who offend in the community.

From the outset, I want to point out that the motion does not refer to young people. It is unfortunate that when most people hear about crime and antisocial behaviour, they automatically assume that it involves young people or that it is the exclusive preserve of young people. All public representatives will acknowledge that, periodically, people from every walk of life are involved in criminal activity or antisocial behaviour. It is not particularly rare to hear about people from professional backgrounds who are drunk and disorderly at public events, for example, and who let themselves down. They certainly do not come from marginalised or deprived backgrounds.

All Members who contributed to the debate, particularly the mover of the motion and supporting colleagues, have said clearly that they fully recognise that to resort to the criminal justice system is not the only way to tackle prolific offending, antisocial behaviour, and so on — far from it. My party is wedded and totally committed to the need to ensure that anti-poverty measures are in place; that support is available to families; and that young people, in particular, can, as much as possible, be diverted away from the criminal justice system and, therefore, do not end up in it. Evidence shows that once young people become involved with the criminal justice system, they are more likely to end up in it again than they would if they had been diverted away from it at an early stage.

The motion is not designed to deal exclusively with young people. It aims to deal with issues that all elected representatives encounter in their constituencies on a daily basis. The motion aims to locate a co-ordinated approach in OFMDFM that will leave to the criminal justice system the matters for which it is responsible. When I refer to the criminal justice system, I refer to it in its entirety — hopefully, in the context of the transfer of policing and justice powers to locally elected representatives. That will add to the array of democratically accountable institutions, such as the Policing Board, district policing partnerships and the plethora of local arrangements that people in many communities have with the police in order to tackle those problems at their source.

Therefore, my party agrees with the motion and the intention behind the amendment. A comprehensive and holistic approach is needed in order to tackle many of those issues that have, unfortunately, become a scourge and a serious burden for many communities.

4.15 pm

We recognise that it is not just a matter of dealing with the issues on an anti-poverty basis, by providing support for families, or by making sure that the criminal justice system and the various other statutory agencies employ all of the appropriate diversionary measures, particularly, but not exclusively, for young people. We must send a message to hard-pressed communities that there will be sanctions for offenders, particularly repeat offenders.

I am very pleased that none of the Members who spoke discounted the motion or criticised its import. The odd, silly remark was made about matters that are far too important to be drawn into a point-scoring exercise, so I will not even address those. All Members who spoke recognised the validity of the content of the motion as being among a range of issues that affect all the communities that we collectively represent.

For Sinn Féin, the amendment, unfortunately, does not go far enough. However, it does have proper intent, and Dawn Purvis spoke well in support of it. I suggest that she does not take issue with the substantive motion, and she recognised some of the implicit elements that Gerry Adams went some considerable way to clarify.

We do not want to fall out over not supporting the amendment, but we feel that, were the amended motion to be carried, it would send out a very negative signal to many people in our community. People in our community need to hear that we, as elected representatives, are fully cognisant of the problems that beleaguered communities often have to face. There is no quick fix for many of those problems. We are fully aware that there is often a clear link between levels of deprivation and marginalisation, particularly within working-class communities. However, crime and antisocial behaviour go well beyond those communities; there is no stereotypical criminal.

In proposing the motion, Sinn Féin is very clear that a comprehensive approach is required to support young people; to create the appropriate and necessary anti-poverty and equality-related strategies; and to give appropriate measures of support to those families who need it. The community needs to hear that we are all fully aware that safeguards against offenders are necessary, particularly against those who have the propensity to offend repeatedly. Unfortunately, we have heard, all too often, of the crimes that are committed within our community. For example, just last week, we heard about a sex offence. That sort of

crime has been a plague in South Belfast and other areas. In another case, a young woman had her car hijacked on a main road in broad daylight.

I thank all who participated in the debate; I appreciate very much that no one rejected the motion and that its validity was recognised. Sinn Féin accepts entirely the intent behind the amendment, but, because it makes no reference whatsoever to the criminal justice system, we cannot support it — it would send out an extremely negative and worrying message to the wider community. We are willing, however, to take on board the amendment's intent and content.

This debate is only the start. Even if the transfer of policing and justice powers were to take place tomorrow, or if those powers were to be given to OFMDFM, this debate would mark the start of our work, not the end, and it is certainly not definitive. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question, that the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for an inter-departmental, multi-disciplinary strategy, informed by the Patten report and the Criminal Justice Review report 2000, to include proposals on alcohol-related crime and prolific offenders, aimed at reducing harm and promoting safety in local communities, to be led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members may take their ease for a few minutes before the next item of debate.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Removal of the Over-30-Months Status

Mr Speaker: I have been advised that the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Conor Murphy, will respond to the motion on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. 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.

Mr Poots: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to take immediate steps to remove the Over-30-Months status from cattle entering the food chain.

Given the situation in the rest of Europe and the review being carried out by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), it is particularly relevant that I bring the motion to the House today. The Minister must take the lead in ensuring that we do not fall behind Europe once again in the status of our produce. She must ensure that Northern Ireland is at the forefront of Europe in marketing its quality produce.

I will outline a brief history of how Northern Ireland came to be in the current situation. In the 1980s and 1990s, food scares were the norm, with "listeria hysteria", as it was called, salmonella in eggs and BSE. BSE was, by far, the worst food scare and caused huge — and justifiable — public concern. Evidence of BSE first appeared in the 1980s, mostly in the latter part of that decade, and grew rapidly in the 1990s. Concern that BSE could be transmitted to humans became public, and in the mid-1990s, the emergence of new variant CJD provided clearer evidence to support that.

From mid-1995 to March 1996, that concern grew rapidly, and action was taken because it was believed that new variant CJD was transmitted from infected meat. Public concern was exploited by some attention-seekers who spoke as scientists but did not base their analysis on facts. Tabloid headlines warned that a generation could be wiped out, or that it was anticipated that 100,000 people would die each year, and they caused the public to be genuinely concerned about the safety of eating beef.

On the back of that concern, several steps were taken, and some, such as the removal of meat-and-bone meal from animal feed, were scientifically based. However, the ban on beef from animals more than 30 months old being used for public consumption was

introduced despite evidence that BSE did not normally kick in until cattle were approximately five or six years old — although, in exceptional cases, younger animals could be affected.

I have no doubt that when John Major announced the ban on public consumption of cattle over 30 months of age, he was attempting to instil public confidence in beef consumption. However, that ban has lasted more than 10 years, has led to the incineration of tens of thousands of animals that would have been fit for human consumption, and has cost the Government billions of pounds. Bearing in mind that thousands of people in the world are starving, it was wrong to slaughter and incinerate so many animals that could have been eaten.

Over the past 12 years, approximately 150 people have died since the emergence of new variant CJD. Every one of those deaths is a tragedy. Given the nature of the disease, those deaths have been debilitating and undignified. However, we must approach the issue in a proportional manner. The Government have spent less money on fighting other illnesses, such as cancer, and we must adopt a wise approach. Therefore, sensible and rational measures, such as removing meat and bonemeal from the food chain, and not using animals that were born before 1996, will facilitate progress.

Therefore, I support the Food Standards Agency, which, in conjunction with the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, stated last week:

“The increased risks to human health estimated by the model from raising the age at which healthy slaughtered cattle are tested for BSE (up to 60 months, the highest age modelled) are very small. The model estimates that much less than one BSE case would be missed annually in the Great Britain herd by increasing the age of testing to 60 months for the healthy slaughter surveillance stream.”

Therefore, support for the motion will not put public health at risk. It is a proportional response to a measure that was introduced many years ago. In 2008, to date, two animals have tested positive for BSE in Northern Ireland. Those animals are, normally, much older than 60 months.

We must make progress. The issue has cost the public purse approximately £3 billion. Furthermore, the ban has cost the agricultural community not only money, but lives. It is a tragic fact that many farmers in the United Kingdom have taken their own lives since the ban was imposed. Those farmers feared for the future of their businesses, and committed suicide. Members must bear that in mind.

The European Commission intends to introduce a 48-months testing regime, and the Assembly and the Minister must ensure that we are not left behind again.

4.30 pm

When we were first excluded from exporting meat in 1996, no one would have believed that it would take us almost 10 years to get back into the export market; however, that is the reality. We cannot afford to hang back and allow the other EU countries to move ahead of us. We must ensure that beef from Northern Ireland has the same status as beef from the rest of the EU countries.

Some supermarkets have indicated that they wish to continue to mark down the price of beef that is over 30 months old. For anyone who does not know, prime beef is prime beef whether it is 30 months and two days old, or 29 months and 28 days old. It should be put on the shelves at the same price. It is likely that older animals were produced in a more healthy way, using fewer compounds and a more grass-based diet. That is a more natural form of production. If supermarkets did right by their customers, they would offer farmers more for a product that was produced by exclusively grass-based means, as opposed to penalising farmers who wish to operate that system.

We must make it clear to supermarkets that it is wholly wrong for them to go down their chosen route. The Government say that meat over 30 months of age is safe — a position that is backed up by the Food Standards Agency, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) and the European Commission. The supermarkets stand alone in reducing the price of that meat, and their only reason is not to pass the saving to customers, but to bolster their coffers. Farmers currently receive approximately £20-£30 less for each animal once it reaches 30 months. Supermarkets must take that on board.

A decision on the matter is long overdue. In the public interest, Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom must move forward and away from BSE, allow that tragic piece of history in our food-production era to pass and — thankfully — consign it to the annals of history.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, but I do so rather reluctantly, as I find it rather silly and futile. Anyone who is aware of these issues knows — or should know — that the EU Commission intends to change the over-30-months status to over 48 months from 1 January 2009. In the meantime, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) must engage in dialogue and understanding with the Food Standards Agency, which is in the remit of the Health Department. That is currently taking place. I find the motion unnecessary as it is quite clear that the work to bring about the necessary change is ongoing.

Mr Savage: I support the motion. From the outset, I stress that the Ulster Unionist Party is fully supportive

of the calls to remove the over-30-months status, as it is an unnecessary hangover from the BSE era.

In March 1996, the over-30-months rule was introduced as a control that was aimed at protecting the public health during the BSE crisis. The Food Standards Agency reviewed the over-30-months rule in July 2002 to consider whether it was still appropriate in light of the BSE epidemic. The agency's review was assisted by two committees — a joint SEAC and FSA risk-assessment group and a core stakeholder group, which represented a range of stakeholders, including the farming and meat industries, and consumers.

In July 2003, the Food Standards Agency board advised Ministers that a move to replace the over-30-months rule by testing all of the over-30-months cattle that went through UK abattoirs was justified on the grounds of public health risk in relation to food and proportionality.

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

In addition, the Food Standards Agency advised Ministers not to change the over-30-months rule until they were satisfied that the necessary arrangements had been implemented.

European rural affairs Ministers later decided that all cattle born or reared in the UK before 1 August 1996 should be permanently excluded from the food chain. In July 2004, the Food Standards Agency's board advised Ministers that replacing the over-30-months rule by BSE-testing cattle born on or before 1 August 1996 continued to be justified on grounds of risk to the consumer.

In light of the FSA's advice, on 1 December 2004, the Government announced the start of a managed transition from the over-30-months rule to a robust BSE-testing system for cattle aged over 30 months and born on or after 1 August 1996. An independent advisory group was established to assist the Food Standards Agency in advising Ministers about the robustness of testing. On 15 August 2005, the Food Standards Agency board considered evidence from the independent advisory group that a BSE-testing regime would be robust if it were to be effectively implemented, complied with and enforced.

On 7 September 2005, the Deputy Prime Minister gave the Committee on Domestic Affairs clearance to replace the over-30-months rule with a system of testing over-30-months cattle for BSE. From November 2005, the over-30-months rule was replaced by a testing system for cattle born or reared in the UK after 1 August 1996. That testing regime complies with EU rules that came into effect in 2003 and it limits the amount of state aid that member states may contribute towards the cost of BSE testing of cattle for human consumption to £27 a head.

Parallel legislation was to be introduced in all UK regions by their respective Administrations. Consequently, from 7 November 2005, the Food Standards Agency introduced measures in Northern Ireland to keep DARD-licensed slaughterhouses under tighter control. Animals over 30-months old may be slaughtered as long as they have achieved a negative TB-test result.

This matter has gone on for far too long. Since the over-30-months rule was introduced in 1996, incidences of BSE have continued to decline, the number of BSE cases in most EU-member states has almost halved and no new cases have been registered in 14 of the 27 member states. Ending the over-30-months rule was considered to pose only a minimal risk, and a realistic estimate of that risk was claimed to be less than one additional variant CJD case in the next 60 years.

In September 2008, the European Commission revealed that it will increase the BSE-testing age for cattle to 48 months. Many people from the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and in farming organisations realise that that is essential.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Savage: I support the motion; it is long overdue. We do not wish to lose the foreign markets that have been established over years, and it is now time to make progress.

Mr P J Bradley: I have no difficulty in identifying with the motion's principle aims; however, given that we have just heard about how recent amendments to EU legislation allow member states to apply to reduce their BSE-monitoring programmes, it is solely up to the UK Government to pursue this matter.

The motion calls for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to take immediate steps to remove the over-30-months status for cattle entering the food chain; however, that will come about only if Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the UK Government apply to have the testing age increased to 48 months.

Before making the necessary approaches to Europe, the UK Government should seek to extend the testing period from 30 months to 60 months. That figure is the result of analysis by the European Food Safety Authority's veterinary laboratories, which indicated that increasing the age at which cattle may be slaughtered for human consumption, and are tested for BSE, from 30 months to 48 or 60 months would be unlikely to result in any test-positive cattle being missed.

The sentiments expressed in the motion by my fellow Committee members Edwin Poots and Trevor Clarke are in keeping with what DARD, the Committee

for Agriculture and Rural Development, the UFU, Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association and the livestock industry dearly wish to happen.

If the change from 30 months to 48 or 60 months comes about, that should give the meat industry economic benefits. The cost of producing meat would be reduced, which should — I use that word carefully — result in producers receiving slightly higher payments for their cattle.

Unfortunately, our farming industry remains at the mercy of the UK Government on such issues, and until an all-island agriculture industry is established, similar in principle to the agency that promotes all-island tourism, our farmers will have little choice but to await whatever benefits come their way, courtesy of the UK Government. However, we all know that Government's support for farming, even in England, makes miserable reading. Indeed, the record of support for agriculture from British MEPs is even worse. One has only to look at the British-driven proposal on pesticides to confirm that view.

In the past, there has been considerable reluctance from Britain to the adjustment of BSE controls. However, as Mr Poots detailed, the industry should take some encouragement from the positive soundings of the report on the BSE debate that took place at the meeting of the Foods Standards Agency on 15 October 2008.

However, should the UK Government fail to pursue the EU offer fully, we may need to seek regional status to secure better deals for the livestock industry. To acquire such status requires the support of the Westminster Government, and that Government know only too well that Scotland and Wales are waiting in the wings, watching everything that happens in the various regions of the United Kingdom.

I refer to regional status because of our good record on BSE. As far as I am aware, over the past three years, there has been only one positive test for BSE in an over-30-months animal that was slaughtered for human consumption. Therefore, it may be possible to attain special recognition in Europe.

The motion is directed towards DARD. However, if, as expected, the motion is unanimously supported in the Assembly today, DEFRA, the Foods Standards Agency and the UK Department of Health must be told of the united political front among stakeholders in Northern Ireland in the quest to have the over-30-months status removed from cattle entering the food chain.

The EU agreement to raise the testing age to 40 months will not be straightforward. Indeed, are any EU regulations straightforward? Those Members who are familiar with the farming industry know the answer to that question. For example, I have learned that, under the new agreement, some matters, such as the obligatory removal of the spinal chord from carcasses, will remain

unchanged. That regulation will probably remain in place for ever.

If and when the change comes about, it will not necessarily change the attitudes of the processors, retailers and consumers. They will continue to purchase to meet their respective requirements. Therefore, we could see the development of two different markets: an under-30-months market and an over-30-months market.

When the motion is passed in the House, there is work that our Members of Parliament should consider undertaking, because the EU is now seeking applications about testing. I suggest to our MPs, two of whom are present today, that a delegation is selected from the ranks of the 13 MPs who are constantly working at Westminster on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland to meet representatives of DEFRA, the Foods Standards Agency and the Department of Health in order to deliver the wishes being expressed here today. Other than that suggestion, I can think of no other idea.

Dr W McCrea: I support the motion that has been tabled by my colleagues Edwin Poots and Trevor Clarke. I speak to the motion not as the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development but as a DUP Member who happens to be the Chairperson of that Committee.

My colleague Mr Poots has clearly and capably outlined the DUP position on this important issue. I believe that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has failed to take the necessary lead in dealing effectively with animal-health issues and the inevitable cost to the industry.

The history of the over-30-months scheme stems from the high incidence levels of BSE in cattle on the mainland. In Northern Ireland, we were, mercifully and fortunately, spared much of the trauma and distress that the disease caused as farmers there watched their animals being destroyed before their eyes.

However, we were faced with the rigid controls that were aimed at protecting public health — the over-30-months scheme. Those were testing times for the farming community, but, once again, our farmers came through with integrity — although they bore a heavy financial burden.

4.45 pm

The imposition of the over-30-months scheme in the United Kingdom prohibited animals over 30 months from entering the food chain. On 7 November 2005, the 30-months rule was replaced throughout the UK with the BSE-testing regime for all cattle over 30 months that were born on or after 1 August 1996. Since that date, such cattle were eligible for entry into the food chain, subject to a negative BSE test. In September of this year, the EU Health Commissioner,

Androulla Vassiliou, announced that the European Commission is to increase the age at which cattle will be tested for BSE from 30 months to 48 months. That announcement followed a proposal from a group of member states' chief veterinary officers.

The announcement was welcomed by many in the farming industry, but, as yet, it has not been confirmed in Brussels, or by the Ministers with the relevant responsibility in Britain and Northern Ireland. Such confirmation would assist farmers with the costs that have been imposed on them, and it would come at a critical time when essential savings must be made in the farmers' budgets.

However, in issues relating to animal health, disease control and the cost to the industry, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her Department have been found asleep at the wheel. The Committee has had to take the forefront in pressing the Department on many issues, but, at times, it has been with little success, unfortunately.

One such example relates to the incidence of TB and brucellosis. Following the Committee's forcing of the Department to confirm that there is correlation between badgers and the incidence of TB across the Province, we expected that the Department and the Minister would take urgent action for the sake of animal health. However, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has failed to take action for the good of animal health, despite the fact that she was granted the authority, by the Minister of the Environment, to cull 1,000 badgers. That is the issue that we are dealing with under the 30-months scheme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Dr McCrea, you must return to the subject of the motion.

Dr W McCrea: The subject is exactly that: it relates to animal health. That is the reason why we are seeking the removal of the over-30-months scheme. The Minister and the Department have failed to deal with the cardinal issue of animal health. The Minister must come up with a recommendation immediately. It was suggested by a Member across the way that the issue relating to the over-30-months scheme has been settled, but it has not. What is the mind of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development? What is the mind of the Minister? We do not know. As usual, their thinking is woolly; they are asleep at the wheel when it comes to taking this issue seriously.

The Assembly is appropriately and properly taking the issue seriously and telling the Minister to deal with the issue. However, if she deals with it in the same way that she has dealt with TB and brucellosis, Members can be assured that she will fail, again, in her duty to protect the health of the animals and public of Northern Ireland.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful that the European Commission has moved on the over-30-months scheme. Farmers in the North of Ireland will be relieved that fewer cattle will have to go through BSE testing and that they will not have to bear the resultant costs. Despite what the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development says, the Minister has been responsible. Furthermore, she has acted quickly to protect the health of the farming community and the stock here through the decisions that she has made on various issues that have come before her in the past number of months. I recommend that the Committee act similarly; it should act responsibly and follow the process that is relevant to the over-30-months scheme. The process must involve the Food Standards Agency, which has a relevant responsibility, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which is responsible for that agency.

The process must be gone through, and I understand that they are looking at the process favourably. The European Commission has also indicated that it is moving on the matter, and it is important that we consult and relate our findings to the Commission.

It would be wrong to decide that the change will come into force immediately and could be in place tomorrow morning. However, it is important to ensure that the industry and the cattle in the North of Ireland are protected. The Minister must examine the long-term effects on the standard that has been set for health and food in the agriculture sector in the North. We must take the long-term viewpoint into account.

The process involves the European Commission, the FSA and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It would be irresponsible of the Minister, or anyone else, to simply decide to do away with the over-30-months rule tomorrow morning. Everyone wants to move towards that situation as quickly as possible, but it must be done within guidelines and with the protection that will ensure that the industry is protected. People throughout the world recognise that the industry here of a high standard and has clear records of traceable stock.

We must be aware of the present situation and recognise that we are in a process. The European Commission has indicated clearly that it will remove the over-30-months status. I hope that the Food Standards Agency will react favourably and that, as a result, the thrust of the motion will be able to go ahead. When the European Commission gives the go ahead to remove the over-30-months status, we can export our meat on the clear understanding that the food exported from the North of Ireland is of a very high standard.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a farmer and as someone who has experienced the over-30-months rule in his farm business. I welcome the opportunity to debate the subject, and I thank my colleagues for bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly.

There is no doubt that it is high time for the over-30-months rule to be abolished. Indeed, the European Commission has reached agreement on the move to 48 months, and our neighbours in the Irish Republic are ready to welcome that move on 1 January 2009, with predicted savings of €8 million a year. The move has been heralded as further proof that the BSE crisis is well and truly past, and it is a major seal of approval for the testing procedures that operate there.

For years, the ruling has been a burden on farmers, and it has cost them dearly. Many cattle approaching 30 months had not reached their full weight potential. Nevertheless, they had to be killed before that age so that farmers were not disadvantaged. However, as many cattle had not reached their full weight potential, many farmers were disadvantaged.

At a board meeting on 15 October, the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland agreed to support the move to testing at 48 months subject to a review of current testing procedures. I welcome the statement by the FSA, although I do not want to see another time-consuming review process further delaying what has been agreed across Europe.

Facts sourced from the 'Farmers Guardian' confirm that of the 1.3 million over-30-months tests carried out in the UK since November 2005 only 10 positives were found, and that the youngest animal to test positive was 48 months old. Those figures back up the success of the testing procedures here. Shifting the limit to 48 months — as has been broadly welcomed by the Food Standards Agency — will save our industry a significant amount of money, time and resources.

I ask the Minister to give the matter her full attention and, with the co-operation of the Food Standards Agency, implement the 48-months rule as soon as possible. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who tabled the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to debate this matter today. I too declare an interest as a member of the farming community.

The impression is that farmers are always looking for something that will cost the Government money, but this is one occasion when they are being proactive in helping themselves and, at the same time, the Department and the abattoirs. We have just heard that removing the over-30-months scheme will save the agriculture industry money. The financial saving should be a key element but not the main element in the matter — it is the food safety element that should be at the forefront of our minds. Such a move would

save the Department resources and money, and the abattoirs and the farming community would also save money. Farmers are trying to be proactive in that regard.

The removal of the scheme will also build confidence in the rural and agricultural communities — and that confidence is desperately needed at the moment, particularly in the beef industry. I am confident that the scheme will be removed. However, I hope that when the process is under way, people — especially the abattoir owners — will not ignore the new approach and instead take the opportunity to reduce the price that they are paying to the farmer. To act differently would be a travesty of justice. We must ensure that that does not happen, if and when the over-30-months scheme is removed.

As I said, the removal of the over-30-months scheme would mean increased confidence within the local farming community, but it would also lead to those in the wider European Union having greater confidence in our industry. In turn, that would lead to greater access to our beef and other products. I hope that progress can be made sooner rather than later. I have heard what Members on the Benches opposite have said, and I am willing to let the process take its own course, if that is the way to do it. However, action must be taken sooner rather than later; some urgency is needed.

Some Members have outlined how the experience of the past years has affected farmers and the industry in general. The ban on cattle over-30-months old has had a huge effect on farmers, both financially and emotionally. As Mr Poots said, that has proved catastrophic for some farmers, and they have been driven to the point of suicide. That is something that we cannot comprehend.

I am led to believe that raising the testing age limit from 30 months to 48 months would remove 40,000 cattle a year from the testing system — I do not know how many more cattle would be removed if the age-limit were raised to 60 months. However, such a move would help the farmer in general. The entire farming industry is trying to move towards a more extensive method of production, and farmers have been trying to intensify their methods in general, especially in beef production — they have been trying to get their cattle finished for beef before they reach 30 months. That has meant increased costs in cereals and concentrates. If farmers could move to a more extensive system, their input costs would be much lower.

Another serious issue is that abattoirs must kill cattle under 30 months and those over 30 months on separate days. That has caused a huge problem, which has, as Mr Poots mentioned, resulted in many cattle that were perfectly fine for human consumption being thrown on skips or incinerated over the years. I want to see an end to that practice. First and foremost, I want

to know that the health and safety of the consumer is kept at the forefront of any decisions on the matter, and that more cost-effective methods of production can be developed.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, and I congratulate my colleagues Edwin Poots and Trevor Clarke for highlighting the issue.

Oor fairmers ir unner sarious pressure tae rear baag bastes at wul kill oot weill whiles steyin' unner 30 montht oan account o' the laa. The EU bes fer bringin' oot laa at wul alther the leemit tae 48 montht an thon wul tak mich o' the strain aff the fairmers, an hits mae notion an the fairmers wha hae spoke tae me about this 'gree – we hae need o' the saime rules in the Province es the rest o the UK an' Europe.

5.00 pm

Our farmers are under immense pressure to produce large cattle that will provide a good side of meat before the age of 30 months, due to the legislation. The EU is introducing legislation that will change that limit to 48 months; that will relieve the strain a great deal. Farmers have agreed with me that the Province needs to have the same rules as the rest of the UK and Europe. Our farmers produce superior beef. I come from Strangford in the heart of County Down, where the grass is greener and, according to farmers, tastier. Our cattle thrive faster, fatten quicker, look better and, most importantly, taste nicer.

It is imperative that beef be free from BSE. However, that does not mean that farms should be unreasonably and perpetually restricted. The legislation in Northern Ireland is too restrictive to allow a flourishing farm to operate properly. The motion aims to help farmers to move away from the problems that they have faced. The restrictions are now unreasonable and unnecessary. The Minister needs to do what should have been done a long time ago. She must loosen the rope and allow farmers to produce superior meat, which is what they do best. With respect, not enough has been done for our farming community or, indeed, our fishing community. I urge the Minister to cut the farming community some slack and make life a little easier for them without making meat any less safe. I support the motion.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture. I congratulate her on the birth of her daughter, and I am sure that the Chairperson and members of the Agriculture Committee will send their good wishes in due course.

The European Commission recently agreed to increase the minimum BSE testing age for all cattle to 48 months for member states that meet the criteria for a revised BSE surveillance programme. DARD has

policy responsibility for BSE testing and introducing the necessary legislation. However, we will not increase the minimum age for BSE-testing of cattle slaughtered for human consumption without agreement from the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Health.

Members may recall that the emergence of BSE came to a head in March 1996, when it was concluded that the most likely explanation for new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans was exposure to BSE. Variant CJD is a degenerative neurological disease, mainly in young adults, which ultimately leads to premature death. Due to the risk of BSE infectivity in meat, no cattle were allowed to enter the human food chain once they had reached 30 months of age. All such animals were slaughtered and destroyed at the end of their productive lives through the over-30-months scheme.

In recognition of the significant strides that have been taken — in Britain and here — to eradicate BSE, the over-30-months rule was replaced by a BSE-testing regime in November 2005. For the first time since 1996, cattle over 30 months of age and born or reared in the UK on or after 1 August 1996 were allowed to enter the food chain, subject to a negative test for BSE. That was welcome news and opened up a new market for cattle older than 30 months. However, the testing requirement placed additional logistical and financial burdens on slaughterhouse operators and farmers.

It is good news that the EU has now proposed that the testing age of cattle for human consumption will increase from 30 months to 48 months from 1 January 2009. P J Bradley referred to the possibility of that age limit increasing to 60 months. However, the EU discussed that and decided that the testing age would be increased to 48 months and not 60 months.

This change is welcome. It will reduce the financial and operational burden on slaughterhouse operators and — as Tom Elliott mentioned — lead to about 40,000 fewer cattle requiring BSE testing in the North of Ireland before they can enter the food chain. However, Members will appreciate that certain procedures must be followed before that can be implemented.

In preparation for the age change for BSE testing, all member states were asked to submit applications to the European Commission for a revised BSE-testing programme. The UK application, which included input from DARD, was submitted well in advance of the EU deadline of 1 September, and it was accepted by the EU expert group on 3 October. The Commission has proposed a draft decision that would allow eligible member states, including the UK, to implement the revised programme from 1 January 2009.

That draft decision was agreed by the EU Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health on

Tuesday 14 October. The next, and possibly last, stage at EU level is one month's scrutiny of the draft decision by the European Parliament. If there are no objections, the new decision should be published in the official journal in preparation for the commencement date of 1 January 2009.

As I said earlier, in order to ensure that the public is protected, we will not raise the minimum age for BSE testing for cattle slaughtered for human consumption without a favourable opinion from the FSA and Health Ministers. At the FSA board meeting on Wednesday 15 October, the board considered the proposal to increase the age for BSE testing, taking into account advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), which is the independent body of scientists and experts that advises the Government on BSE issues. SEAC advised that an increase in the age for BSE testing for human consumption in cattle would represent a minimal-to-negligible increase in the risk to human health. Edwin Poots mentioned that earlier.

SEAC also emphasised the importance of appropriate BSE surveillance in monitoring infection levels to ensure that they remain extremely low. The FSA board supported the move to testing at 48 months, but it does not wish that to be implemented until a further report on surveillance has been produced and passed to SEAC for review.

If the Health Ministers agree to the increase in the BSE-testing age in the UK, DARD will introduce an amendment to the Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 to provide the legal basis to increase the age for BSE testing of human-consumption cattle. Officials in DARD will take that forward urgently with the FSA and with officials from the UK Department of Health to ensure that the necessary legislation is in place in line with the European Commission timetable.

I encourage the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development to lend its full support to the draft legislation when it is subject to scrutiny. That would greatly assist in the timely introduction of the new BSE-testing age for human-consumption cattle. To introduce a new BSE-testing age to the North of Ireland now, before the necessary European legislation comes into force, would be a breach of the EU legal require to test human-consumption cattle for BSE at 30 months of age.

Tom Elliott mentioned abattoirs. Abattoirs do not have to kill under-30-months cattle on a different day from over-30-months cattle; they can kill them on the same day, but at different times. Unfortunately, Mr Elliott is not here, but I am sure that he will pick up my response to his point in Hansard.

William Irwin asked about further delays. DARD does not intend to consult on the proposal to raise the BSE-testing age. The Food Standards Agency has

consulted widely in Britain and in the North of Ireland to assess the views of stakeholders. The new BSE-testing age will be incorporated into the draft TSE regulations, which were subject to a consultation that ended on 26 September 2008.

I can confirm that immediate steps are being taken to ensure the introduction of the increased BSE-testing age of 48 months for human-consumption cattle from 1 January 2009, subject to the necessary EU legislation being in place and to the agreement of Health Ministers. However, to stop BSE testing for healthy cattle over the age of 30 months that are slaughtered for human consumption now would be in breach of EU regulations. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr T Clarke: It is difficult to speak after so many Members have spoken on the subject. Many of them are farmers and, therefore, have a better knowledge of the issues than I have. My colleague Edwin Poots asked me to sign the motion, which I had pleasure in doing.

Those of us not from an agricultural background have not been directly affected, but we have heard much about the subject, and I concur with many of the remarks that have been made. Unsurprisingly, I am disappointed by the Members from Sinn Féin. It sometimes appears that instead of protecting the industry, they are protecting the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Pat Doherty said that the motion was futile; on the contrary, if the motion had not been brought forward, the Minister might have done the same as she has done with other topics that have been discussed by the Committee and put the issue on the back burner.

Before and after taking office, for example, the Minister had very different views about the Agricultural Wages Board. The industry is crying out over the Rose Energy proposal, which the Minister now wants to make the subject of a public inquiry. Those issues directly affect the agricultural sector.

Last night, while pondering what I would say in the debate, I wondered whether another "A" should be inserted into DARD's title, in order to make it the "Department against agriculture and rural development". As far as I can ascertain, the Minister has not championed the industry at all. However, I thank everyone who contributed to the debate for their positive comments. If there were not so much scepticism about the Minister, there might be less concern over whether the new measure will be introduced in January 2009.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to take immediate steps to remove the Over-30-Months status from cattle entering the food chain.

Adjourned at 5.11 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 21 October 2008

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr Molloy] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council Summit in Edinburgh

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the First Minister wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council summit that was held in Edinburgh.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the eleventh summit meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC), which was held in Edinburgh on 26 September 2008. All Northern Ireland Ministers who attended the summit have approved the report, which I make on their behalf.

The Scottish Government hosted the summit in Hopetoun House, South Queensferry, Edinburgh. The heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister for Scotland, Alex Salmond. The British Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon Paul Murphy, the Secretary of State for Wales. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan. The Government of Guernsey were represented by the Chief Minister, Deputy Mike Torode, and the Government of Jersey were represented by the Chief Minister, Senator Frank Walker. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Chief Minister, the honourable Tony Brown.

In addition to the deputy First Minister, junior Minister Donaldson and I, the Northern Ireland delegation comprised the Minister for Regional Development, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development. A full list of participants is attached to the statement that has been provided to Members.

The summit was the third such BIC meeting since the restoration of the institutions in May 2007. The

Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, chaired the meeting, which focused on demography, energy, an update on the strategic review of BIC and a report on progress in the various BIC sectoral areas.

The Scottish Government lead the demography work sector. That is an important topic, because migration is a contributory factor in determining the population of each BIC Administration. Migrants tend to be relatively young, and, therefore, help to rejuvenate the population. Enlargement of the EU, coupled with increased mobility, have been major, and unpredictable, factors. All BIC members share concerns about the impact of migration on public services such as housing, health and education. The British-Irish Council could facilitate a joint approach to policy-making and better understanding of potential impacts. Therefore, the Council must strive to understand migration and its impact.

During the summit meeting, the British-Irish Council noted the progress made on migration issues and endorsed further work on understanding migration and its impact, fertility, healthy independent ageing, and student flows.

The importance of accurate and timely migration statistics is recognised by all Administrations, as is the value of greater sharing of information, methodology and sources between Administrations. The Irish Government have offered to lead the sharing of information on the measurement of migration, with a view to enhance the understanding of migration statistics and to provide a context for potential solutions to be explored.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government on the experiences of employers working with migrants from A8 accession countries has been completed. That research indicated the potential economic gains that could be achieved if migrants' skills were to be fully utilised and their language skills and careers were to be developed. It highlighted also that employers require an understanding of the immigration system and support in applying United Kingdom employment legislation. Further work is planned on the effect of migration on the labour market, its impact on public services and the factors that encourage longer-term settlement.

Northern Ireland, which has conducted a survey of migrant workers, plans to host a meeting of the BIC demography work stream in order to present the findings of that survey. The event will also provide an opportunity for the dissemination of similar research carried out across the BIC member Administrations.

Each BIC member Administration faces a future with relatively few working adults to support those people who are in retirement. That places great importance on planning care and support for an ageing population.

Healthy ageing policies can help older people to live and work according to their capacity and preference.

The aim of such policies is to prevent or delay the onset of disabilities and chronic diseases that limit independence and are costly to individuals, families and the health and social services systems. It is important to promote opportunities for physical, social and mental health, and to ensure that older people continue to be active in their communities, remain independent and enjoy a good quality of life.

The demography ministerial meeting held in March 2008 endorsed co-operation at governmental level, with a view to adopting an evidence-based approach to the effect of integrated accommodation, care and support strategies for older people. An event to showcase the results of research on independent healthy ageing is planned for November 2008. The British-Irish Council summit agreed that that event would be used to identify the key policies in each member Administration relevant to healthy independent ageing, with a view to identifying areas of work where sharing of experience would be beneficial.

At the British-Irish Council summit held in Belfast on July 2007, it was agreed to undertake a strategic review of the Council, and to consider work programmes, working methods and support arrangements, including those for a standing secretariat. That work was taken forward by the British-Irish Council secretariat, in liaison with member Administrations. An interim report was considered at the Dublin summit in February 2008.

In relation to the work programme, the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, discussed the viability of adopting energy as a new work stream, and he offered Scotland as the lead on that issue. The Council agreed that energy is an area of mutual interest, not only as a vital contribution to economic growth, but in tackling climate change. Ministers discussed the need to ensure security of energy supplies, including the opportunities for renewable energy resources, such as harvesting the offshore energy between the coasts of Scotland and Ireland via a sub-sea grid.

Ministers also considered the impact of energy on climate change, and agreed that reducing emissions through improving energy efficiency would help towards reducing fuel poverty.

The Council agreed that carbon capture and storage presented parallel opportunities to make a contribution to climate change, and to export an advanced technology as a commodity to other countries. The Council agreed that the proposal that energy be adopted as a new work stream should be subject to further work and be taken forward for decision at the next summit in Wales.

The Council considered progress on the strategic review of the British-Irish Council. It noted the proposal for the remit of the standing secretariat to be expanded to provide for an enhanced role in managing the work of the British-Irish Council and supporting the agreed

work programmes, in addition to continuing to fulfil its current secretariat responsibilities. The Council discussed the principles that should be applied in determining the location of a shared standing secretariat. It noted the likely costs of the standing secretariat and also considered the further work that would need to be done to develop the accountability and financing structures for the standing secretariat. The Council mandated the current secretariat, in consultation with member Administrations' co-ordinators, to continue its work, with a view to presenting full proposals at the summit in Wales in 2009.

The Council recognised the valuable work that had been achieved by the work streams in tourism, the knowledge economy and e-health, and agreed that those could now be concluded. In addition to the decision taken in relation to the Scottish proposal on energy, the Council agreed that proposals on child protection, housing and collaborative spatial planning from Northern Ireland, and a proposal from the UK Government for a work stream on digital inclusion, should also be subject to further work, to be taken forward for decision at the next summit in Wales. The Council agreed to adopt an early-years policy work stream, with Wales leading.

The Council noted the recommendations arising from the tenth summit meeting, held in Dublin, which had focused on the importance of supporting families in overcoming the problems caused by drug use and how those recommendations could be used in any future drugs strategies.

The Council welcomed plans for transport and environment ministerial meetings in the months ahead.

The Council took the opportunity to consider the current global economic climate. Ministers expressed their deep concern about the impact of the global financial crisis on the local economies. They noted and welcomed the efforts being made internationally to stabilise the situation. Ministers noted the value and importance of learning from, and co-operating on, measures taken and being considered in all member Administrations.

Finally, I can report that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Welsh Assembly Government on 20 February 2009.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I welcome the First Minister's statement on the September meeting of the British-Irish Council. However, it raises a number of questions. When officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) briefed my Committee in May 2008, they advised that the review of the British-Irish Council would be completed in time for the September meeting in Edinburgh. Will the Minister explain the

delay, and indicate when he expects the review to be completed?

The First Minister made reference to the likely costs of the standing secretariat. Will the Minister indicate what additional work needs to be done, and give a timescale for the completion of that work? Did OFMDFM propose that the shared standing secretariat be located in Northern Ireland? What is the likelihood of Northern Ireland being chosen as the location for that?

The First Minister: All who were present at the Edinburgh meeting will recognise that very real progress has been made by the secretariat on the issue of a standing secretariat, and issues arising from that, such as determining the level of staffing, the location, and many other similar issues.

10.45 am

The review was delayed because of the focus on the work streams. Everybody recognises that, perhaps, more than ever before, there has been a greater focus on east-west and North/South relationships. Certainly, I have found that the stilted format of those meetings, at which Ministers were almost at the level of simply delivering their lines, has made way for a much freer flowing style. That has proved valuable. In that context, it is important to have structures in place to take account of what really works for Ministers. The costs will be determined by the location and the number of staff required, which could be substantial given that the number of work streams is ever increasing. That shows the increased level of involvement of each of the Administrations in an east-west context.

We have submitted a bid for Northern Ireland to be the location for the standing secretariat. However, Scotland, Wales and, I think, the Isle of Man, have also submitted bids. Each of those Administrations will propose the detail and the particular attractions of their bid. It is hoped that we will examine those options at the Wales summit in 2009.

Mr Weir: I welcome the First Minister's statement. I am glad that the Northern Ireland Ministers who attended the conference had their satnavs working. At least some Members from Northern Ireland managed to find their way to a conference of a British-Irish nature.

I am sure that the First Minister and the House will agree that the biggest issue facing people throughout the British Isles, and BIC Administrations, is the present economic crisis. What proposals were suggested at the summit to help to address that problem?

The First Minister: I am just glad that the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body had not taken up one of the earlier options of meeting in Perth, Scotland, or someone may have ended up in Australia. Members from the Northern Ireland Administration managed to

be there on time and make a very full contribution to the summit.

One of the strengths of the summit was the sufficient flexibility afforded to Administrations to raise matters that are of particular importance to them. That is our new *modus operandi*. As a result, there was a lengthy and detailed discussion on the economic crisis, even though the issue had not been originally included on the agenda. There was significant common ground in the concerns expressed by each Administration. The Northern Ireland delegation proposed that further collaboration should take place between the Finance Ministers, to which delegates at the summit readily agreed.

Since then, meetings have already taken place and contacts have been established. The Administrations have exchanged information on the steps that they have taken and those that they are considering so that each can learn how the others are tackling the issues. That has allowed us to assess whether there is benefit in our adopting steps carried out by other Administrations and has been very useful.

Taoiseach Brian Cowen had just returned from the United States, and he was able to provide delegates with an update on issues relating to the credit crunch and the economic crisis. That also helped to inform our discussions.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his statement. I welcome that BIC will adopt energy as a new work stream. Will work be undertaken to consider social tariffs for energy companies' profits?

I note that the Minister said:

"reducing emissions through improving energy efficiency would help towards reducing fuel poverty."

However, we should examine the issue of imposing social tariffs on energy companies' profits to help to alleviate fuel poverty.

Raymond McCartney and I will host an event in Derry tomorrow. It is to be an information day and a public event on the rising fuel and energy costs. Across the North — even across the whole island — many people are talking to us, on their doorsteps, about the rising need for the Assembly to assist them in dealing with the fuel poverty that many of them are facing.

When we take into account the work that will be taken forward, there is an opportunity for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Ministers to talk to BIC about their work programme and to seek to address the specific issue of social tariffs on energy companies' profits in order to further alleviate fuel poverty.

The First Minister: The Member for Foyle has done well to advertise her event tomorrow, and those

who have listened will be able to go along and hear what takes place.

The decision on social tariffs will be taken, ultimately, between the regulator and the energy companies. Undoubtedly, the Administrations will have a view on that issue. It was not among the matters that were discussed at the BIC meeting. It is an issue about which there may well be some controversy before a view is taken by each of the Administrations, but the Member is entitled to her opinion on the matter. The issue was not discussed at the summit.

Mr Attwood: I, too, welcome the report, not least because the BIC is one sector of the agreement's architecture that is meeting and doing good work on behalf of the various Administrations.

I refer the Minister to his statement, in which he confirmed that the Council adopted two new work streams — for an early-years policy and for energy. The Council has also stated that it may adopt new work streams next year in respect of child protection, spatial planning and digital inclusion. Given that the Minister said, in answer to a previous question, that work streams are “ever increasing” and that there is greater involvement of the respective Administrations, can he reconcile the Council's ability to get on with those work streams and do good work in that regard with the impediments that are placed in the way of initiating and agreeing new work streams in other areas of the North/South architecture?

I hope that, when the Minister replies, he will not say that that is different because there is an ongoing review of the North/South bodies — which there is — given that there is also an ongoing review of the Council. Even though that review has not been concluded, as Mr Kennedy has indicated, the Council can nonetheless develop its work programme and new work streams, and get on with good business on behalf of the people of these islands and elsewhere. The same principles do not inform what is happening in respect of the North/South bodies and other North/South initiatives.

The First Minister: What the Member fails to point out is that the east-west relationships must catch up with the existing North/South structures. All the delegations and, literally, each of the parties involved have recognised that we can take the work of the institutions away from the party political and recognise that each of the separate institutions have very real advantages in the networking, information sharing and collaboration that takes place. That is just as important on a North/South basis as it is on an east-west basis. It is not a case of the east-west relationships moving ahead of the North/South ones; the east-west relationships are catching up. In the previous Administration, the ratio of meetings was 10:1 in favour of “North/Southerly”.

Both are important. We are committed to all the institutions and to making them work for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. The deputy First Minister and I are committed to ensuring that all the institutions move forwards apace.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the First Minister for his statement, and I welcome that BIC sees value in greater sharing of information, methodology and sources between Administrations. I will comment on the part of the statement, which indicates that BIC welcomes better facilities for an ageing population.

Mr Shannon: The Member is almost a pensioner, himself. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: We are all heading in that direction, and one has to look after oneself.

As the First Minister knows, there is free personal care for the elderly in Scotland, which means that they do not have to sell their homes when they need care. Were there any discussions with, or advice received from, our Scottish neighbours about the provision of free personal care for the elderly, so that we can introduce it here sooner rather than later?

The First Minister: The decision on whether Northern Ireland adopts a policy of free personal care for the elderly will be taken by the Executive and the Assembly. The only issue that is slowing down that process is cost, and it is for the Finance Minister and the Health Minister to decide whether the appropriate funding is available. The Assembly has supported the principle of free personal care for the elderly, but funding is the key issue. Unless the Member and his party can tell us which of our existing services should be removed to provide free personal care for the elderly, we must wait until additional funds become available.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister outline the work that Northern Ireland has undertaken in the demography sector? Will he confirm or deny that, as part of that work, there are plans to hand out satnavs to elderly politicians?

The First Minister: Northern Ireland's contribution comes in the form of a study that is already under way. Over a short period, emigration from several EU countries and, in many cases, further afield, has significantly increased our population. That has been necessary for, and helpful to, our economy. Indeed, many parts of our economy would be in much difficulty if the immigrant population decided to go home. Therefore, it is significantly important to the running of some sectors in our economy. It also is important because, by and large, our population is ageing. Migrants are young and they help to balance age profiles in the economy.

The study will try to gather more information about their length of stay, their purpose for being here, whether they are putting down roots in Northern Ireland, and

all the factors that are important in our decision-making on day-to-day issues, such as health and housing. The survey has been carried out, and officials are beginning to examine the outcomes. We also want to share our findings with colleagues in the other Administrations and examine the studies that they have carried out.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the First Minister's statement. Mr Deputy Speaker, I, along with your Deputy Speaker colleague Mr David McClarty, have just returned from Newcastle upon Tyne — not Newcastle, County Down. Yesterday, Minister Eamon Ryan TD addressed the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which is the new name for the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, on energy issues. That will be of interest to the First Minister, given the content of his statement.

11.00 am

Does the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have a vision of a particular type of relationship between the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the British-Irish Council? That assembly has an appetite for an oversight role. Does OFMDFM have a notion to adopt such a course?

With regard to migrant workers, there is no emphasis on the exploitation of migrant workers in all the jurisdictions that are mentioned in the report. Not having to reinvent the wheel is a good thing. Committee D of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has just completed a report on promoting the rights of migrant workers, and I commend that report to OFMDFM for its consideration.

Therefore, do the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have any vision for developing a relationship between the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the British-Irish Council, and are there any preliminary assessments of the costs of the secretariat that would administrate it?

The First Minister: I welcome the fact that the parliamentary tier has moved and improved its method of working in a way that is now much more inclusive of the two unionist parties that are now taking their place in that new assembly. It is an indicator of the maturity of our own institution and the progress that we have made that the parliamentary tier is moving away from having a body that, in effect, considered Northern Ireland problems and fitted them into the overall British-Irish context, to one that examines wider British Isles issues.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has, to some extent, a useful role if it shadows some of the work of the British-Irish Council. The deputy First Minister and I will encourage that work, and we are prepared to play our full part in any invitations for us to attend the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which can do useful work.

The deputy First Minister and I have some knowledge of the issues that are connected to the exploitation of immigrants, particularly migrant workers. We recently met consuls from the Latvian and Lithuanian embassies and consulates in the UK, and they made clear some of the difficulties experienced by their workers, including exploitation of some of the migrant workforce. That has to be a concern for us, and we will discuss those matters with our appropriate ministerial colleagues. The Member is right to draw attention to the issue. We must ensure that people, whether migrants or otherwise, are not exploited in the Northern Ireland workforce.

Mr Ross: I also welcome this morning's statement. The First Minister said that there were plans to hold a transport ministerial meeting in the months ahead. It is clear that road safety is a big issue in Northern Ireland. Will the First Minister update the House on the work that the transport sector has done on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications?

The First Minister: Northern Ireland takes the lead in the transport sector, and considerable work has gone into recognising the penalties that exist in each of the other Administrations. I believe that legislation is being introduced in several of those Administrations, including our own, in order that there is recognition of those from Northern Ireland who have penalties in other Administration areas.

It is right that we have that new relationship, which was advanced under my colleague Arlene Foster when she was Minister of the Environment. Legislation on the matter is, I believe, progressing in other Administrations, and that is to be welcomed.

Mrs D Kelly: I refer the First Minister to matters under "Any Other Business". Apparently, the credit crunch was discussed. Was there any discussion about the acceleration of publicly funded work programmes? Given that during the past few days the construction industry has issued a cry for help and called for the Assembly to develop publicly funded work programmes in order to assist it in its difficulties, have any such discussions on the matter been held on a North/South basis?

The First Minister: I am aware of the ill-informed call that was made by a particular individual who purports to represent the construction industry. That person is clearly unaware of how decisions are taken in Government and would do well to appraise that position before he speaks publicly about such matters.

Decisions on the acceleration of work programmes are not being held back due to the Executive's position. The deputy First Minister and I have met representatives of the construction industry. At that meeting, we undertook to attempt to develop and accelerate the capital spend programme. To make good that promise, we met soon afterwards with the chairman of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and asked him to develop a programme

that will not only accelerate the capital build programme, but will carry it out smoothly so that there is continuity of spend.

We pointed out to the construction sector that there is a good-news story on capital spend, which has increased from approximately £750 million each year during the last comprehensive spending review period to approximately £2 billion each year for the next 10 years. That is a considerable uplift. The proposals that are being considered by SIB are intended to accelerate the capital spend programme in Northern Ireland. Hopefully, every Department will have responsibility for that, because it deals with housing, hospitals, roads, schools, and so forth. The Executive hope to be able to accelerate the capital spend programme.

The one difficulty that has been placed in the way is a successful legal challenge to procurement policy, which requires either for the decision to be appealed or for new procurement methods to be examined. Indeed, that might involve a return to more conventional procurement methods in order to accelerate the process. Ministers will take those issues into consideration when they examine how to progress the matter.

As regards the first part of the Member's question, BIC did consider fast-tracking capital spend programmes. The Member will have noted that during the past few days, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has adopted a "spend, spend, spend" policy, which is in common with the package that the Scottish Administration have developed. The Executive will also adopt that policy.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the First Minister's statement. Undoubtedly, the British-Irish Council's work is important. Nonetheless, Executive meetings are more important in trying to tackle Northern Ireland's problems. Can the First Minister advise the House of any suggestions from the various Administrations about potential new work streams?

The First Minister: I agree with the Member that it is important that the Executive's work gets under way. I must counter some of the nonsense that has been uttered publicly, which claims that Ministers do nothing and that Assembly Members have gone on holiday. All the Assembly's work continues. Ministers' work, apart from new policy direction and new legislation, continues. Therefore, work goes on. The Member is correct. However, new projects, policy direction and legislation are being stifled by the absence of Executive meetings.

We are working hard to find ways to get over the present difficulties and to ensure that outstanding issues are resolved. That is work in progress.

The Northern Ireland Administration have been taking the lead in several new work stream proposals. In the statement, we outlined three of the proposals put forward by the Northern Ireland representatives at the summit. Our colleagues at the Edinburgh summit agreed that the detailed consideration and decision on

those potential new work streams will be taken at the summit in Wales in the early part of 2009. As the SDLP Member said, that will include housing. There was, in principle, general support that we move forward in that direction. In Wales, we will, I hope, pick up those new work streams, which will indicate a deeper involvement and a greater interest by BIC to expand its work programmes.

Mr Shannon: I am encouraged by the First Minister's statement. I am encouraged, too, that the Scottish Government have adopted at least some Ulster-Scots terminology, in that they met in Hopetoun House in Edinburgh. It is good news for those of us who are trying to promote the Ulster-Scots language that the Scots people have caught on to it.

I have a couple of questions for the First Minister about the statement. Since migration affects us all in the Province, is there any intention to encourage some of those who left the shores of the Province and went to Scotland, Wales or the UK mainland to return home?

The First Minister mentioned energy, and there was some talk about how we could work with our Scottish counterparts to provide energy. Has any thought been given to wind-farm energy, particularly along the east coast of Antrim? Has consideration been given to how that would affect the fishing industry?

Although there has been an indication that the British-Irish Council will not meet until 20 February 2009, is it fair to assume that the present economic crisis will be discussed before then? Issues unfold every day and change within a week, and it is important to be reassured that meetings will take place, even though the Council will not officially meet until 20 February.

The First Minister: There is something of a contradiction in the Member's question. He is right to point out our long-standing cultural links with Scotland; indeed, I was in Scotland on Saturday night and described myself as being at home there. The Member mentioned people from Northern Ireland who went to universities in Scotland and decided to stay. However, if one is a true Ulster Scot, is one not still at home there?

The issue was discussed; looking at the patterns that have developed is part of the demography work stream. Many young people from Northern Ireland went to Scottish universities and have not returned. I put it to the Member that, as much as anything else, that has to do with the potential for high-quality jobs in Northern Ireland and the standard of life that existed during the period euphemistically described as the Troubles.

I believe that we have turned that corner. Northern Ireland is now a much more attractive place for young people to live, work and grow up in. I believe that we will start to see those who went elsewhere for education drift back to Northern Ireland. We must encourage people, where possible, to remain in universities in

Northern Ireland, and those universities must be suitably equipped for that.

11.15 am

Wind farm energy was discussed, and if the sectoral meetings on energy take place, they will, no doubt, involve considerably more discussion on the subject. We examined various forms of renewable energy, of which onshore and offshore wind farms form important elements, and proposals exist in Northern Ireland on how to advance in that direction. Those are the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Planning Service.

The Member is correct that the next BIC summit is likely to be held in Wales in February 2009, when we can revisit the subject of the economic crisis, which is unlikely to have been resolved before then. BIC demonstrated that it is sufficiently flexible to include that subject on the agenda because of its significance, and I have no doubt that it will do so again.

However, it is not a question of having to wait until February before holding further discussions. Further contacts between the Finance and Economy Ministers of the various Administrations have taken place, and papers have been exchanged. That demonstrates the benefits that can be derived from collaboration among the Administrations. That collaboration is now focused on an important issue.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the First Minister's statement and the encouraging progress made by the BIC.

The First Minister's reply to a question from Mr Attwood included an admission that BIC is playing catch-up. Implicit in that is further admission that the new streams of work of the North/South Ministerial Council are being stymied somehow. That catch-up approach should not prevent work on new North/South areas being explored.

I particularly welcome the emphasis on renewable energy and the lead that Scotland will take on that. When will that give rise to specific proposals, and will those have a particular bearing on Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: It is probably impossible to answer that because the speed depends on the sectoral meetings and the considerations of several Administrations, and it would, therefore, be wrong for me to try to timetable it. As a general rule, it is better not to set deadlines or work out timetables but to travel positively towards the attainment of goals, and I commend that approach to the Member.

I assure him that there was nothing implicit, or otherwise, in my comments on BIC process having to catch up on North/South issues. My comments did not point to a brake being applied to the North/South sector. We want to make progress on all fronts, and it benefits all the people of Northern Ireland that we collaborate to progress issues of practical co-operation.

The greater the extent to which those relationships can exist without political implications, the more progress can be made and the more at ease people will be with those institutions. All those institutions are moving in the right direction. My colleagues and I have worked positively in the North/South institutions and see genuine value in that work. The nationalist Ministers who attend BIC summits equally appreciate the benefit to be gained from exploring with Ministers in other Administrations the work that they do and the mutual learning of lessons that that facilitates.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the First Minister's statement and the fact that at least one institution is working to its full potential. I hope that soon that will be the case for all institutions, including the Executive.

The First Minister has acknowledged that some of the Government's work is being stifled by the lack of Executive meetings. However, I trust that that hurdle will be overcome soon. During the meeting in Scotland, some Ministers must have had red cheeks because the Executive are not fully operational.

Will the First Minister assure the House that work is being conducted to deal with sex offenders? How should we police sex offenders whose despicable actions know no boundaries? Although I understand that that matter was not on the agenda in Scotland, will the First Minister or the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensure that it is a substantive issue on the agenda of the BIC summit meeting in Wales? The Assembly can learn from how other jurisdictions deal with such predators and eradicate instances where there has been a lack of co-operation among jurisdictions in sharing the information and expertise that is necessary to ensure that we police, track and trace those offenders appropriately.

The First Minister: The Member for North Antrim makes an important point with which few Members will disagree. The Northern Ireland Administration — led by the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey — will make a proposal at the Welsh summit to establish a new work stream to consider child protection. To some extent, that proposal will cover a large and sensitive area — albeit not the complete area — of how we tackle sex offenders. I hope that the other Administrations will adopt our proposal.

All Members want to present the Northern Ireland Administration and its work in the best possible light. We want to demonstrate that all our institutions are working. That will increase confidence among the population in Northern Ireland and will enhance our reputation worldwide. The Assembly must work hard to ensure that all institutions are operating positively and at full tilt. None of us achieves any credit when meetings do not take place, especially at a time when the wider community is experiencing real hardship.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Review into Publicly Funded Fertility Treatment in Northern Ireland

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the review of publicly funded fertility treatment in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): After an Assembly debate on 25 October 2007, my Department conducted a review of fertility services. The motion called on me to initiate a comprehensive review of the criteria used to assess eligibility, including the age-weighting criteria, the ongoing waiting list problem and the number of IVF treatments available on the NHS, with a view to establishing a more equitable and accessible policy.

A stakeholder group, which included representatives from user groups, the boards and trusts, was established to conduct the review. That group's input, as well as a 2007 Health Service review, formed the basis of my proposals to improve access to publicly funded fertility services. I am grateful for the stakeholder group's input.

Infertility has a devastating impact on couples who want to complete their family by having a child, and it is important that the Health Service does everything that it can to help and support couples in that unfortunate position. However, as Members know, my limited resources are subject to competing demands. Publicly funded fertility treatment has been available in Northern Ireland — initially on an interim basis — since 2001. In September 2006, after a consultation process during which a wide range of views was expressed, arrangements for a publicly funded specialist fertility service were announced. That consultation resulted in the clear message that access to fertility services should be widened, and, therefore, a set of criteria was published.

That included raising the upper age limit for women using their own eggs to receive treatment from 37 to 39, allowing people with dependant children to access the service and allowing people who have been sterilised to access the service at the discretion of their clinician.

By widening the criteria, more couples were able to access fertility services. In particular, the raising of the age limit from 37 to 39 was aimed at helping those women who did not join the waiting list until their mid-30s. Often, couples trying to have a child will wait for a number of years before turning to fertility treatment. Women who are approaching the age limit when they join the waiting list for publicly funded IVF treatment can find themselves in the heartbreaking situation of breaching the upper age limit before they are called for treatment.

I encourage couples who are having difficulty conceiving to seek timely advice from their general practitioner who may be able to offer some simple diagnostic tests that may help to provide reassurance or to identify an underlying medical problem.

It was important to ensure that counselling services were made more accessible to couples who were considering fertility treatment. The decision as to whether to use fertility treatment can be difficult for some couples. Added to that, the treatment itself can be emotionally stressful, particularly if it is unsuccessful. It is a time at which the best advice and support should be available to help couples to make the decision that is right for them. Funding limitations mean that access is limited to one cycle of treatment per patient, which is in line with the majority of areas in the UK.

Following a year of operation under the 2006 criteria, the four health and social services boards and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust reviewed the situation. That review showed that the relaxation of the age and the dependant children criteria had allowed an additional 233 couples, who would previously have been ineligible, to access fertility treatment — a 55% increase in eligible patients, which is significant. However, the evaluation also highlighted that the increasing demand for treatment exceeded the available resources with the result that waiting times had increased. During the October 2007 debate, Members raised concerns about the length of waiting times for treatment, and the fact that it could lead to some couples in their 30s breaching the upper age limit before being called for treatment.

The review conducted by my Department addressed a number of areas, namely, the appropriateness of the existing criteria for accessing the service, the management of the waiting list and how any available extra funding could best be used to improve the service.

I emphasise that the stakeholder group that provided valuable input during the review process was supportive of the existing access criteria, and did not see the need for significant changes. In particular, it recognised that existing criteria provided fair and equitable access to services.

A couple of minor amendments have been suggested. Existing criteria allow for a very small number of women, using donated eggs, to access services up to the age of 49. Stakeholders felt strongly that, whereas only a small number of women are affected, it nevertheless introduces inequity into the system. It is, therefore, proposed that the upper age limit for a female partner using donated eggs should be reduced from 49 to 39, which is in line with the criterion for women using their own eggs.

An existing criterion also requires that couples receiving treatment are in a stable relationship. From discussions with stakeholders, it became clear that that

criterion is impossible to apply and may run counter to equality legislation in Northern Ireland. It is proposed that the criterion restricting treatment to those in a stable relationship should be removed. That proposal is made on the understanding that treatment should be limited to those with a diagnosed medical problem with fertility, and that the child's welfare — and, specifically, his or her parenting needs — are considered in line with legislation. Those proposed amendments will form part of a public consultation, and I encourage everyone to respond and make known their views.

Waiting times for treatment is an important matter. Currently, waiting times can vary depending on where a person lives.

11.30 am

The current system of separate waiting times for each board area was introduced with the positive intention of allowing each board to match supply and demand in its own area. However, that has led to an unacceptable situation in which waiting times can vary depending on where a person lives.

In considering waiting-list management, my aim has been to ensure equitable access for all by providing a clear and transparent system that allows those who access the service to know when they can expect to be treated. I propose, therefore, to change the current system of separate waiting lists for each health and social services board area by introducing a regional list. That new system will be introduced, along with any other changes that result from the consultation.

As I have previously stated, my Department faces many competing priorities. However, I am pleased to announce that I have managed to secure extra funding for fertility services that will make a real difference to reducing waiting times over the next six months. I will invest £800,000, which, commissioners advise me, will allow up to 200 extra women to be treated before the end of the financial year. I expect the waiting time to be reduced to a maximum of 12 months shortly afterwards.

In the longer term, I aspire to meet guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), which recommends that three cycles of treatment should be offered to those who seek fertility treatment. However, just as in the rest of the UK, the lack of funding makes that extremely difficult to achieve. As a first step, I want to ensure that we make the best use of any additional recurrent funding that I am able to secure. Therefore, as part of the consultation, I will ask whether couples want access to a second treatment opportunity or whether they would prefer to further reduce waiting times in the first instance. The question of which of those options best meets the priorities of service users will form an important part of the consultation.

The additional funding is good news for fertility services and couples who desperately want to have a child. The aim of the review has been to ensure fair and equitable access to that service and to ensure that we make the best possible use of the resources at our disposal. I am therefore pleased to announce the launch of a public consultation on publicly funded fertility treatment in Northern Ireland. I look forward to hearing the views of the public and of Assembly Members, which will help inform the way forward.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement on this very important subject. I particularly welcome the proposal to introduce a regional waiting list, which will ensure that women are treated equally, irrespective of where they live. I also welcome the provision of additional funding, which should allow more couples to receive treatment and should go some way towards improving the current position.

In the past, I have made the case for women who are approaching the upper end of the age limit to be given priority so that they do not end up being discharged from the system before they are able to receive treatment. That is an issue that still needs to be addressed. When we debated this issue in the Assembly in October 2007, the Minister indicated that approximately 590 patients were waiting for IVF treatment, and that approximately 420 cycles were provided each year. Will the Minister provide an update on those numbers, the current waiting times, and whether there have been any improvements since the debate in October 2007? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The current waiting list comprises just over 600 people, and the current treatment cycles are running at just over 440 a year. With the investment providing an extra 200 treatments, it is anticipated that that will allow the waiting list to come down to around 400 people, which almost matches the current number of available treatments. That means that no one will wait longer than one year for treatment, which is a positive step.

The issue of age weighting has arisen time and again. Stakeholders studied that issue and strongly feel that age weighting should not occur because it is not equitable. If women at the upper end of the age scale were age-weighted, women lower down would suffer because there are only so many cycles available. Age-weighting one group of women would effectively deny others treatment. Therefore, the way to deal with that is by attacking the waiting lists, which I will do using extra investment.

Mr Easton: I broadly welcome the Minister's announcement, and I am especially pleased with his

proposals to introduce a regional waiting list, treat an additional 200 women and invest extra finance, and with his aim to allow three treatment cycles.

Nevertheless, I have some concerns. First, will the £800,000 be new money or money arising from efficiency savings? Secondly, I am concerned that the age limit for the use of donated eggs will be reduced from 49 to 39. Will the Minister estimate how many women that measure will affect? Obviously, some women will lose out.

Finally, I am concerned that, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee said, circumstances might arise in which the appointments of women who intend to use their own eggs and who are already on the waiting list are cancelled through no fault of their own — due to their doctor being on leave or for some other reason — and, subsequently, those women may go beyond the age limit and lose out. Will the Minister tell Members how he intends to address that inadequacy in the system?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member asked several questions, and I will attempt to remember and answer them all. His first question was about waiting lists. The key to ensuring that no one must wait for longer than 12 months is to invest money, and that is what I am doing. Given that the waiting list is currently 600 treatments and we manage to carry out 440 treatments per annum, if we invest money to conduct a further 200 treatments, the waiting list will fall below the annual required provision. That allows us to say that no one will wait for longer than 12 months.

The stakeholders considered age weighting to be inequitable; it has resulted in younger women being disadvantaged. Moreover, fertility-treatment success rates drop dramatically as women get older. Therefore, it is essential that women go to their GPs and access services earlier. The NICE guidelines recommend three cycles, which, although seldom reached due to funding limitations, is an aspiration throughout the UK. Of course, funding limits what we can do, so we must prioritise spending.

Concerning the extra £800,000, the Member will be aware that I negotiated flexibility within my budget, and that allows me to move funds around, which is what I am doing in this case. I will not be taking money from anyone else; money will be available because other funds have been underspent or spent more efficiently, thus allowing me to redirect them.

Mr McCallister: It is excellent to see a Minister responding to a debate in the House, and I congratulate and thank him for that.

The Minister's announcement is good news for couples. The regional list is welcome because it will eliminate the postcode lottery. The time that couples

spend undergoing fertility treatment is difficult, and they will be greatly encouraged to hear about the extra funding that is to be invested in such services. Will the Minister pledge to work with stakeholder groups in order to keep this matter high on the agenda and, if he manages to find more resources, will he invest them in those services?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Colleagues are well aware of the funding situation for health services and, at Budget time, when I negotiated extra resources, I made it clear that, although not enough, the amount of funding that was allocated was as good as it would get.

There is a gap in provision between Northern Ireland and England of approximately £300 million, which will double over the next three years. Everyone is aware of that situation, so we must ensure that the service remains efficient. However, we also must prioritise, and that leads to tough decisions having to be made. I am aware of the need and of the problems that exist in this area, and, after careful consideration, I have decided that the best way forward is to invest and to ensure that waiting lists are reduced to being within 12 months. That is a reasonable position.

I aspire to having a situation in which patients receive three cycles of treatment, and I also aspire to having no waiting lists. However, funding does not allow for those situations.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that he has taken action following the Assembly's debate on fertility treatment in October 2007. Despite the scepticism of some in the value of tabling motions, this is another instance where the Minister has listened and is dealing with a problem. I hope that the end result will be to the satisfaction of many people.

I also welcome the public consultation that is outlined in the statement. Will the Minister tell us when the closing date for that consultation will be? Furthermore, following that consultation, when does the Minister expect that a decision will be made?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I cannot be specific on the date, but I anticipate the consultation to last around 12 weeks. A decision will then be made as quickly as possible.

One always looks for consensus during a consultation. Only when that cannot be found do I have to make a decision. I anticipate that a decision will be made as quickly as possible, certainly by next year. I will publish a timetable as soon as I can.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members who have spoken today, I feel that there are several action points in the Minister's statement, and I thank him for those. In a

previous answer, the Minister touched on how he aspires to implement the NICE guidelines of offering three cycles of treatment to patients. Will the Minister tell us when that important aspiration will become a reality? He has stated already that he has the flexibility in his budget to move the necessary funds around in the event of an underspend.

Furthermore, does the Minister believe that the new regional hospital for women and children will have a part to play?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Clearly, the success of fertility services will add to the demand on services in the new hospital, and that is to be welcomed. As I said previously, I aspire to having that hospital built as quickly as possible. However, there are funding limitations, and the Member is as aware of those as I am.

The Member is correct to say that implementing the NICE guidelines is an aspiration. However, funding and providing three cycles of treatment would mean taking money away from other areas. Therefore, it is a matter of balancing priorities. In my view, ensuring that waiting lists are kept within 12 months is a reasonable approach, given the available resources.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like all other Members, I welcome most of the aspirations and details of the Minister's statement.

I am delighted that the Minister has clarified the situation as regards stable relationships — that issue has created a great deal of inequality. Paramount to a stable family is ensuring that the welfare of the child is raised. Therefore, I am glad that those criteria have been changed.

However, I want to highlight the issue of counselling and support. Anyone who has dealt with families contemplating, going through or on a waiting list for IVF treatment will know that such experiences are very traumatic.

That was talked about at last October's Assembly debate on IVF fertility waiting lists, at which the Members who spoke made valuable contributions. However, I am working with families who are still going through that trauma. Will additional funding or resources be made available for counselling and the provision of emotional support to couples who are attending their GP and, subsequently, referred for treatment?

11.45 am

I assume that many people feed into the consultation. However, if the feedback from the consultation conflicts with the views of the stakeholder group, what will the Minister do?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We hope to find consensus through

consultation, but I do not want to pre-empt my position. The consultation will end on 13 January, and, as soon as possible after that, I will present its conclusions. Counselling is important, and it is an area in which we have invested. It is important, as in so many areas, to provide the necessary emotional support and advice to couples and individuals who are involved in fertility treatment.

I welcome Ms Ní Chuilín's comments on the removal of the criterion restricting treatment to those in a stable relationship. It is impossible for fertility services to determine whether a relationship is stable. However, the overarching principles must be the requirements of the child and his or her parenting needs, and they have been protected in the proposals in the review.

Mr Attwood: I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the beginning of the Minister's statement; I was at a Committee meeting. I join other Members in welcoming the review and its outcomes, particularly the decisions relating to the availability of more money and the regional list.

Before Mr McGimpsey came into office, I had to wait many months before departmental officials were able to confirm to me how many people were on waiting lists in the North. That long wait — six months — did not fill my constituents or me with confidence. At that time, however, officials confirmed that there were approximately 500 people on a waiting list.

I return to the issue of women who turn 40 when they are on the waiting list. The Minister knows that I was dealing with a case in which a woman turned 40 when she was twelfth on a waiting list of more than 500. As soon as she turned 40, she was no longer entitled to treatment. Some Members will have similar examples.

According to the Minister, the review group said that it would not be equitable to favour those who are about to turn 40 and that to do so would discriminate against younger women.

I have said to the Minister before and I say to him again: the Department is applying the wrong test. If a woman who is about to reach the age of 40 is being treated, the test should be based on whether there is a disproportionate disadvantage to younger women. It should not be on whether there is disadvantage but on whether there is disproportionate disadvantage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr Attwood: Did the stakeholder group take legal advice on favouring the older woman over the younger? If the stakeholder group did not take legal advice, will the Minister do so now? Was a computer program used to determine the effect on young women if those who are approaching 40 were treated early? If a computer

program was not used, the review — welcome as it is — has missed important features.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Attwood raised a lot of questions, and I will respond as best I can.

NICE guidelines state that the limit is 39 years of age — up to the woman's fortieth birthday — and that advice is based on scientific evidence. The success rate shows a dramatic difference between women in their twenties or early thirties and older women, and the Department is aware of that fact. The stakeholder group took the view that it could not make an exception, because to do so would be to deprive women in their thirties who have been on the waiting list for the same length of time. My approach is to attack the waiting list to ensure that no one waits longer than one year.

Mr Attwood referred to legal advice. The Department is carrying out a consultation process that will end in mid-January. That information will have to be equality proofed and, therefore, there will be legal advice. I presume that the stakeholder group review will have examined how that advice will be determined, although I cannot be specific. The whole consultation process will be legally proofed — as one would expect.

As regards running a computer program, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has strict and tightly controlled guidelines. It is difficult to tell who is at that upper age limit without breaching confidentiality. However, that is the view of the stakeholder group, and the Member has a different view. We are carrying out a consultation, and those with different views can come forward. However, in advantaging a woman of 39 years of age, one would be disadvantaging a woman of 29 years of age.

I am not sure that I have covered all of Mr Attwood's points. However, I will read the Hansard report and reply to him in writing.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I beg to move

That the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The purpose of the statutory rule is to revoke the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) Order (Northern Ireland) 1999, which prescribed the functions that may be undertaken by traffic wardens. Until October 2006, parking offences were treated as criminal offences and, therefore, the responsibility of the PSNI. Traffic wardens were employed by the PSNI to enforce parking restrictions, and the 1999 Order established the functions of the traffic warden.

In October 2006, parking enforcement was decriminalised by the Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, and became the responsibility of my Department. As part of the new decriminalised parking enforcement regime, traffic wardens transferred to the NCP as traffic attendants to enforce parking on behalf of the Department. As there are no longer any traffic wardens, the 1999 Order is now obsolete. The Department has consulted with the PSNI, which has confirmed that it is content for the 1999 Order to be revoked.

I am grateful for the consideration given to the proposal by my Executive colleagues and by the Committee for Regional Development. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has also considered the Order and is content. That has allowed the Order to proceed to today's debate to seek affirmation. As a result, I am recommending that the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed by the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee for Regional Development considered the proposal for this statutory rule on 30 April and indicated on 7 May that it was content with the policy merits of the proposal on. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 10 September and resolved on 24 September that it be affirmed. The Committee for Regional Development is content that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr G Robinson: It is encouraging to see the legislation being amended, as it brings clarification to a difficult area.

The Committee's view was that it should support the changes, and I concur with that. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I totally agree with the recommendation. I want, however, to raise one issue. In the past, traffic wardens could be called on to divert traffic in emergencies. The new traffic attendants do not have that power. Does the Minister have any ideas about how to cope with the emergencies that unfortunately happen?

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee members for their support of the motion. Regarding Mr Dallat's question: in 2001, the police stated that they no longer considered parking enforcement to be a core policing function. The Department then considered a business case to take on decriminalised parking enforcement, and that was discussed in detail with all the key stakeholders, including the police. It was agreed that only parking enforcement duties would be decriminalised, and that all other duties, including directing traffic, would remain the responsibility of the police. That proposal was reflected in a policy consultation document, published in August 2003, that related solely to parking enforcement. Therefore, to answer Mr Dallat's question, the police will remain responsible for directing traffic and all other traffic functions, apart from parking enforcement.

I am confident that the statutory rule that is before the Assembly will clarify the position as regards traffic attendants and their functions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Road Traffic (Traffic Wardens) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I beg to move

That the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

The purpose of this statutory rule is to amend the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 to clarify that the maximum speed limits prescribed in those regulations are subservient to any lesser speed limit applying to the same length of road by virtue of other specified statutory provision. The Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 authorise the maximum speed for different classes of vehicles on motorways, dual carriageways and other roads. For example, in the case of a car, the maximum speed on a dual carriageway is 70 mph.

In addition to those overarching speed limit regulations, specific speed limits may apply to individual roads, or lengths of roads, by virtue of other statutory provisions. In such circumstances, the relevant legislation is silent as to which speed limit has precedence. The statutory rule is intended to remove that potential anomaly by providing that, in such circumstances, the lower of the two speed limits always applies.

I am grateful for the consideration given to the proposal by my Executive colleagues and the Committee for Regional Development. Furthermore, the Examiner of Statutory Rules has considered the statutory rule and is content. That has allowed the statutory rule to proceed for affirmation today.

I therefore recommend that the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): As the Minister said, the purpose of the statutory rule is to clear up an anomaly that came to light in December 2006, when a member of the public contested a speeding fine that was incurred while driving along the A55 outer ring road. When the case came before the Magistrates' Court in October 2006, the magistrate dismissed it. The Departmental Solicitor's Office was 'consulted, and its view was that, as the legislation stands, two speed limits could apply to that stretch of road. Each speed limit is authorised by different statutory legislation and neither piece of legislation has precedence over the other. Therefore, the current situation is unsatisfactory.

The road safety implications are noteworthy. It is understood that the PSNI has suspended enforcement of the speed limits on that particular stretch of the A55. A recent poll of UK drivers found that drivers in Northern Ireland were the most likely to speed, and the Department has indicated that such ambiguity about speed limits may apply to other roads. The obvious solution — the

addition of a 30 mph sign at the relevant point on the A55, where the single carriageway becomes a dual carriageway — does not appear to address the issue satisfactorily.

12.00 noon

Leaving aside the Department's policy of not providing repeater 30-mph signs because of the environmental impact and sign clutter, Roads Service indicated that there may be other roads on which the ambiguity applies. Putting an additional sign, or signs, on the A55 would provide only a local solution.

The motion seeks to clarify the legislation in Northern Ireland to ensure that speed limits in the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 take precedence over the speed limits authorised by the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989.

The Committee for Regional Development considered the proposal as a statutory rule on 16 January 2008, and indicated that it was content with the policy merits of the proposal on 23 January 2008. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 10 September, and, on 24 September 2008, it resolved that the statutory rule be affirmed. The Committee for Regional Development is content for the statutory rule to be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Dallat: In Northern Ireland, measurements are made in both miles and kilometres. If my car breaks down on the M2, the signs instruct me to walk so many metres to the nearest telephone, but the speed of my driving is measured in miles per hour. The Minister lives in South Armagh, so he will be aware that his driving speed is measured in both miles per hour and kilometres per hour within a few miles of his home. What progress has been made to standardise speed limits here with those in the rest of Europe?

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The point that Mr Dallat made has been raised on several occasions in discussions on road safety. Those discussions are primarily undertaken by the Minister of the Environment and his Department at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format. It is primarily a road safety issue and is dealt with by the Department of the Environment, but I will endeavour to find out what progress is being made.

I am grateful for the Chairperson's comments and for the Committee's consideration. I am confident that the statutory rule will clarify the position and help to prevent future ambiguity on the maximum speed limit that drivers must observe. In turn, that will help to improve road safety. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Motor Vehicles (Speed Limits) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be affirmed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

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.

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.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Bain Report on the location of public sector jobs and welcomes its recommendations; calls on the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive to pursue its recommendations with an active policy of decentralisation with the full co-operation of all departments; and further calls on relevant Ministers to address the access problems of inadequate infrastructure and poor public transport identified at Enniskillen, Cookstown and Downpatrick so that, to achieve better balanced economic growth, these towns can be considered for the further location of public sector jobs.

Reforms in the public sector and advances in technology offer new possibilities for how people work and deliver services. Therefore, the Bain Report's exploration of implications and new possibilities is timely.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The clocks in the Chamber seem to have frozen in time. Although Members are keen to listen to Mr Gallagher all day long, that may make it difficult for him to know how long he has left in which to propose the motion.

Mr Dallat: That was a timely intervention. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gallagher: The motion welcomes the recommendations in the Bain Report to roll out some Civil Service jobs to the six towns that are identified. That will include around 4,000 jobs, and although that is a small fraction of the total workforce in the public service, it is, nevertheless, encouraging news.

The motion also welcomes and supports Bain's attempts to promote economic development and to reduce social deprivation. It calls for access problems at Cookstown, Downpatrick and Enniskillen, which the report identifies, to be addressed. The report states that those towns could benefit from possible future waves of decentralisation. Poor roads and poor public transport were given as the reasons that those towns were not considered at this stage. Consequently, they have not been included in the current list of towns that will, I hope, benefit from the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. Therefore, it is essential that those three towns are given the necessary attention and support to put them on an equal footing with the other six towns.

The amendment is weak, because it contains nothing to oblige the Executive, or any Department, to address the problems. When the issue of disadvantaged areas — particularly those in the west or on the periphery — comes up for debate in the Assembly, there is always an outpouring of concern. However, nothing has been done, particularly for Enniskillen and Fermanagh. As the report shows, that area is trapped in a chicken-and-egg situation; it is a vicious circle. It cannot be considered for investment because its roads are not good enough, and the roads cannot be improved because funding is not provided to do that. Therefore, I urge Members to reject the amendment.

I welcome the report. The SDLP has long argued for the benefits of the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. The implementation of the report's recommendations will be a step on the road to creating a better regional economic balance.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way. The Member will speak to the amendment, and when he does so, he will have an adequate opportunity to have an input.

The introduction to the report reminds us of the need for regional economic balance, and in order to ensure that economic benefits are accessible to a wider group, it sets out the importance of reducing the disparities in economic growth in Northern Ireland and of tackling the social deprivation that exists in parts of Northern Ireland. That was a primary consideration of Bain's work in compiling the report, and it would be difficult for any Member to disagree with the objective of reducing disparities and inequalities.

The report states that the infrastructure in the receiving locations must be sufficiently robust to absorb and sustain public-sector employment over time. It recommends six locations to which public-sector jobs should be located: Derry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine. The report suggests that the scale of relocation should be commensurate with the infrastructural capability of each of those centres, and we welcome the proposed job relocations to those towns.

The report, as I said, identifies three other towns with particular problems that can only be considered as relocation centres if limits in relation to infrastructure and access are addressed. In the interest of equality of economic opportunity, I demand that those infrastructural and access limitations be addressed now. If reducing social deprivation and economic disparities is to be taken seriously, rather than be paid lip service, those problems must be addressed immediately. Invest NI's usual circular argument, which uses the lack of infrastructure as an excuse for a failure to attract investment to the area, has left many people in the west feeling quite sick and tired.

Now that Enniskillen has been named along with two other towns in the Bain Report as having accessibility problems, the Government have a duty and responsibility to address those issues in the interests of equality, fairness and economic opportunity. Everyone knows that lack of economic opportunity is directly linked to social inequalities and deprivation. The Executive have the task of implementing the report's recommendations; to move from rhetoric to real and concrete benefits on the ground for people across Northern Ireland.

The important point is that the Executive can hardly do that work if they cannot agree to meet. It is not surprising that many people wonder whose interests the Executive hold uppermost. Therefore, people in the west do not want to be again told that they should be grateful that a new road extension is being built from Dungannon to Ballygawley. Yes, that is helpful; however, upgrading roads in another county is not good enough, and it certainly does not amount to upgrading roads in Fermanagh, which must be done.

Professor Bain directs his comments at the problems in Enniskillen thus:

"The town is poorly served by its transport networks."

That is not news to anyone who has tried to get through that town. A bypass is needed, and must be made a priority. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) has been asked to approve a bypass for the past 20 years, but nothing has been done. The people of the area, meanwhile, continue to wait while, as the report states, job opportunities pass by their area. I hope that the review that has been announced by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will lead Invest NI to rethink its current strategy of directing investment to Derry and to Belfast, because that strategy must change.

The Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland aim to create:

"economically competitive and socially cohesive cities and towns and thriving and sustainable rural communities".

In order to create "sustainable rural communities" there must be a review of the present policy of closing rural schools.

Mr McGlone: I, in common with Mr Gallagher and other Members who represent areas west of the River Bann, do not see much compatibility between the recommendations of the Bain Report and what is happening at present. A cursory glance at last week's local press revealed that Northern Ireland Water wants to close more of its local offices in towns west of the Bann. Those towns have already been denuded of rates offices and roads offices.

That said, if there were a functioning Executive that were fit to bring forward projects and to promote industry —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Gallagher's time is up. There will be no extra time for the intervention.

Mr McGlone: Does the Member agree that those projects would benefit the area west of the Bann? I am thinking, in particular, of the policing college in Cookstown, which would help the construction industry.

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

Mr Gallagher: That turned out to be a timely intervention —

Mr Deputy Speaker: No extra time is allowed for a 10-minute speech.

12.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Simon Hamilton to move the amendment.

Ms S Ramsey: Give way to Tommy.

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not let Tommy finish — he has had enough time.

I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "its" in line 2 and insert

"contents and conclusions as an important contribution to the ongoing debate on this issue, and calls upon the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report to the Executive and the Assembly in a timely manner, having carefully considered the various consequences, including value for money, of the Report's recommendations, with views on how this matter may be addressed."

I want to make two points clear on moving the amendment standing in my name and in that of the clock-watcher in chief, Mr Weir. First, the DUP supports the concept of relocating public-sector jobs. That is evident, as a DUP Finance Minister initiated the process that led to the report that we are discussing today.

Secondly, I do not disagree with many of the conclusions of the Bain Report — in fact, I agree with the vast majority of them. The report contains many sensible proposals. For instance, the towns outside greater Belfast that have been named as possible locations for relocating public-sector jobs are sensible suggestions, as is the idea of a phased approach to their relocation.

The pursuance of the relocation of public-sector jobs from Great Britain to Northern Ireland is a sound objective. The recommendation that we should avoid grand, dramatic proposals and that we should proceed in a modest and prudent manner is very much the basis of my contribution, and I will move to that shortly. However, I have some issues with the report; hence my unwillingness to give it blanket support at this stage. I will also be requesting an examination of the consequences of the report.

First, I want to touch on the report's complete exclusion of the greater Belfast area as an option for the relocation of public-sector jobs. Indeed, the report goes a little further than that, in that it recommends that there should be "a presumption against locating in Belfast".

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, briefly.

Mr McCarthy: Northern Ireland Water, which is a Government-owned company, announced only last week that it is closing offices in Conlig, Lisburn and Downpatrick and relocating them to the centre of Belfast. Does that action not completely contradict the wishes of Bain and our Government?

Mr Hamilton: I understand the point that the Member makes. He will also be aware of the consultation on DARD Direct's equality impact assessment on the relocation of jobs from the constituency that we share. However, it is inconceivable that there is no opportunity to shift public-sector jobs in the greater Belfast area as defined in the report. In fact, there are some arguments in favour of the idea.

There are already low levels of public-sector jobs in some district council areas surrounding Belfast. Many people from those areas are employed in public-sector jobs in Belfast, but the job location itself does not tend to be in those district council areas. The appendices of the report show that Larne, Carrick and my own area of Ards have low levels of full-time employment in the public sector per 100 of the working population, compared with all the towns that have been named as locations for relocating public-sector jobs.

Regional economic balance may not be a consideration for relocating in the greater Belfast area, but there are benefits to moving outside Belfast, not least environmental benefits. Furthermore, traffic congestion would be alleviated if people did not have to commute to Belfast every day.

It is inconceivable, even on the regional economic balance argument, that there are no areas in Belfast where public-sector jobs could be moved to encourage economic development.

In introducing any such programme, we must also examine the consequences of the impact that it might have on the necessary scale and size of Belfast and the greater Belfast area as an economic driver for the whole of Northern Ireland.

The amendment also mentions value for money. If we are going to embark on any programme of relocation of public-sector jobs, we would be foolish to do so without considering cost and value for money. It is unfortunate that Sir George Bain's report is being published at a time when finances are limited and there are obvious constraints on our budgetary position. That is where we are, and if anyone requires evidence of the need to make cost and value for money the foremost consideration, they only have to look to our neighbours south of the border. Only last week, they halted their relocation programme because of value-for-money

considerations at this difficult budgetary time that they, we and other Governments are experiencing.

There are other consequences that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Executive colleagues should consider carefully when moving this programme forward. Not all the agencies that are listed as possible candidates for moving will be as easy to relocate as they might first appear. Northern Ireland Water, which other Members mentioned, and Land and Property Services are possible candidates for relocation, because they occupy several offices across Belfast. It has been suggested that those bodies and their employees should be lifted out of Belfast, but that process is neither simple nor straightforward. Some would argue that operational difficulties exist within those organisations, to put it mildly. Would lifting Northern Ireland Water or Land and Property Services wholly out of Belfast help them to do their jobs?

The under-representation of Protestant males in lower grades in the Civil Service is also a well-recognised problem. That begs the question: would moving public-sector jobs from Belfast to some of the towns that have been mentioned assist or hinder the resolution of that problem?

Overall, however, the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly should adopt a sensible, sure-footed and steady approach to the subject. Such an approach should be phased, and not too ambitious, as Sir George Bain recommends in his report. The success, or rather, the failures of others who have gone before us in other regions of the UK, and in the Republic, provide us with a note of caution; an examination of those experiences is essential in moving forward.

We should consider the Scottish experience. The most significant problem highlighted by the experiences of other jurisdictions is staffing. The unions in Northern Ireland support, in principle, the relocation of public-sector jobs, but the experiences of Scotland and Ireland show that when hardy comes to hardy, staff are not always as supportive as their unions or political representatives might be.

If the Minister decides to proceed with relocation, it will be interesting to see whether staff will come complaining to those Members who urge us to be impetuous in the relocation of jobs. The Scottish example has shown that, according to an Audit Scotland report:

“most current staff did not transfer from the original location.”

Of those surveyed in Scotland, fewer than a quarter moved.

A recent Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report recognised the massive challenge that relocation of jobs posed for the Irish Government. It states:

“indications were that in some areas, turnover of staff who were opting not to relocate with their departments or offices could be as high as 90%.”

It is clear that such a problem poses considerable challenges for public service delivery in Northern Ireland as well. If that situation were to be replicated here, what effect would the loss of expertise and knowledge that staff would not take with them have on the continued quality of service that would be provided? What additional training costs would be bound up in all of that?

Even in relation to that small element of what can happen, and what has already happened in other jurisdictions, the lesson is that we must take a cautious approach to the whole subject matter.

The motion is not as steady and sure-footed as it should be, and the lesson that must be learned when formulating any policy on the relocation of public-sector jobs is that we must be steady, sensible and sure-footed. We must learn the lessons and heed the examples that have been experienced elsewhere in these islands.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún.

I welcome the motion, and thank the Members for tabling it. The motion refers to three specific towns that are mentioned in the Bain Report, and I agree that we need to address the issues of regional disparity and objective need. I will take this opportunity to speak in a parochial manner, and I make no apologies for that. Although the report at least acknowledged those towns, I was disappointed that Armagh City was not mentioned at all in the report, as were all other MLAs who represent the constituency of Newry and Armagh.

Armagh is a unique city, and is historically renowned as the city of saints and scholars. It has developed as a centre of religion and administration over the years. In recent times, Armagh City and District Council has been at the forefront of promoting the city as a destination for tourism, shopping, arts and culture — although, the shopping that I refer to is of the niche kind, and does not involve big retail developments and substantial numbers of jobs. However, it is true to say that the city's special characteristics — the listed buildings, conservation areas and narrow streets — have constrained the growth of private-sector investment. Armagh totally relies on public-sector jobs to sustain its local economy.

The major employers in the city and the surrounding area are the Health Service, the education and library board and the district council, which are responsible for some 985 jobs — some 40% of employees in the city. The properties in which those jobs are housed, many of which are historically significant buildings of unique architectural value, account for approximately £400,000 of rates contribution. I dread to think what

would happen to those buildings if those jobs were moved out of the area.

Armagh has no major private business that caters for hundreds of employees. Small firms that have fewer than 50 employees account for 99.1% of all employment. There is no major retail development compared to those of our near neighbours in Newry and Craigavon, nor is there any major foreign investment strategy. Failure to retain or replace public-sector jobs in Armagh would be a disaster for the city and district. The motion mentions the need for infrastructure; I remind Members that the Minister for Regional Development recently announced the proposal for a link road in the city, which will allow welcome relief and ease of movement and transportation in and around the city.

The Bain Report is to be welcomed. There is a need to relocate a number of public-sector jobs outside of Belfast, but not with the result of job losses elsewhere. It would defeat the purpose to relocate jobs from towns and cities such as Armagh when the local economy is so dependent on those jobs. Recently, all the MLAs who represent the constituency of Newry and Armagh, from all parties, signed a letter to be sent to the Minister, asking that special consideration be given to including Armagh in the Bain Report. That demonstrates how serious the situation would be were Armagh to be stripped completely of all public-sector jobs.

I can understand the Members who proposed the motion wishing to fight the corner for their local constituencies — I am fighting the corner for Armagh city. Those Members have given me the opportunity to highlight a potentially serious problem, and I hope that the Members in the Chamber will agree, as their colleagues in the constituency agreed, that this is an issue that deserves to be acknowledged and addressed. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: 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, when the first Member called to speak will be Mr Danny Kennedy.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Kennedy: The Bain Report on the relocation of public-sector jobs was always going to create winners and losers. At the outset of the debate, it is important to recognise that Bain's scope is relatively modest. A total of 3,000 to 4,000 public-sector jobs are involved in the first pilot projects, which amounts to some 2% of the total.

Bain had to find some kind of formula for the relocation of public-sector jobs to provincial centres as opposed to Belfast, and that formula had to be rationally defensible. Ultimately, Bain has based his findings on travel-to-work areas, and, when the other factors on which the report touches are stripped away, the travel-to-work areas largely determine the location of the provincial centres that are to receive an influx of public-sector jobs. The trouble with using travel-to-work areas as the basis for change is the widely varying size of those areas. The Belfast travel-to-work area, for instance, stretches from Larne to Newcastle. Consideration must also be given to the amount of time that it takes to travel at peak times in those areas.

Although consideration of travel-to-work areas may, at first, appear to be a rational way in which to approach the issue, it is not necessarily the correct way to do so. Admittedly, Bain tempers that approach with other infrastructural, sustainability and community considerations, but the fact remains that historic patterns of public-sector job distribution are so important to the towns, cities and areas in which they are located — and the economy of those areas — that any undermining of that situation could seriously damage local economies. Nowhere is that more true than in the great city of Armagh, and that is the flaw of the Bain Report.

Public-sector employment is a vital part of the local economy in Armagh, and it is essential that the Executive do all in their power to retain that situation. Median gross weekly earnings in Armagh are below £350, compared with the Northern Ireland average of £405. The downside of Armagh's public-sector dependence is that it has resulted in a potential for job generation that is only 68% of the regional average. As a result of being a centre for public-sector employment, Armagh has experienced employment growth of only 2.5%, compared with the regional average of 3.7%. At the very least, Armagh has the right to expect the Executive to protect its public-sector jobs base.

I welcome the Minister to his place; he is aware that I have written to him on behalf of other Members from my constituency to request an urgent meeting to discuss the Bain proposals. Already, there are significant threats to public-sector employment in Armagh, with important relocations having taken place.

Although those relocations have been described as temporary, considerable misgivings have been expressed in Armagh about them. The headquarters function of the health and social care trust has been moved from Armagh to Craigavon Area Hospital, and the headquarters function of the regional further education college from Armagh to Newry. The creation of the education and skills authority casts some doubt on the long-term existence of the headquarters function of the Southern Education and Library Board. In addition to those concerns, doubts have been cast on the survival of Armagh as a council headquarters, following the merging of Armagh City and District Council with Craigavon District Council and Banbridge District Council.

Before we run with Bain, let us walk with common sense. We cannot, as an Assembly, agree to the asset-stripping of public-sector functions from places such as Armagh. If we are not careful, that will lead to the unravelling of the economy of one of Northern Ireland's premier locations — a very old and respected place, and the principal seat of our two main religious denominations. That is why I support the amendment; it sets Bain as only one marker on the road to progress and does not make it the final word on public-sector job relocation. This is a road that will have many turnings.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party welcomes the debate and prefers the less-specific nature of the DUP amendment, which we will support.

There is plenty in the Bain Report with which we agree, and we agree with Mr Hamilton's point that there is potential to transfer jobs from the UK to outlying areas of the Province. However, we are not so sure about the thinking behind moving existing jobs from Belfast to west of the Bann. There is a need to examine the problem, but that will not simply be a matter of relocation, as suggested by either the motion or the report.

The relocation of significant numbers of public-sector jobs can be prohibitively expensive, as evidenced by the experience in the Republic where decentralisation has, apparently, come to a grinding halt because of the costs that are involved. We should take note and learn from our neighbour's experience, because a similar process is now being suggested for the North.

The Alliance Party recognises the underlying rationale of decentralising away from greater Belfast. However, we must be cautious in our approach and ensure that a full cost-benefit analysis is completed for each proposal. The city of Belfast has a relatively high gross value added (GVA) figure that is the third highest in the UK behind London and Edinburgh. Indeed, the way that things are going, it might soon be the highest, because financial-services jobs are evaporating in those two cities.

By contrast, the rest of Northern Ireland has a very low GVA compared with the UK average. However, we should be wary of drawing the wrong conclusions from that. There is a temptation to assume that Belfast is overheating and that economic activity can be better balanced across the Province and that the easy way to do that is by relocating public-sector jobs. However, that cannot be a substitute for private-sector-led genuine economic growth.

Belfast's GVA is high in only relative terms, and a large proportion of it is public-sector based. These days, international competition is not necessarily about states, but about cities and city regions. The Belfast region needs to have sufficient critical mass in order to be a regional economic driver and to punch its weight internationally, which it cannot do at present. Indeed, it is regrettable that Belfast has been deemed to lack the critical mass that is required to sustain a proper rail-based rapid transit system.

Therefore, the problem may be not that the public sector in Belfast is too large, but that it is too small. That argues against the principle of moving jobs to outlying areas of the Province. We should be thinking in terms of a greater Belfast, or a Belfast city region, and considering siting jobs in the greater Belfast area — and, at the risk of sounding parochial, including Bangor, Carrickfergus, Lisburn and areas that are close to where existing and potential staff live.

Mr McNarry: Newtownards.

Mr Lunn: Newtownards and Strangford. There should not be a presumption against locating new jobs in greater Belfast.

Although labour-market mobility is important, there are strong economic and environmental arguments for providing non-market-sensitive public-sector jobs in the areas where people live. Siting more jobs in the places that I mentioned and examining locating jobs in the Belfast city area would help to reduce the number of residents who commute, and it would help to lessen the strain on the local infrastructure.

The Alliance Party feels, therefore, that the report — as always with anything that Professor Bain produces — is a valuable contribution and a great starting point. However, the subject requires careful consideration, and we agree to proceed with caution on the matter. Therefore, we support the DUP amendment.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I, too, support the amendment tabled in the name of my colleagues Mr Hamilton and Mr Weir.

However, it is important that we place on record our thanks to George Bain for his work. It was an immense task to outline and, indeed, to start the important thought process of how we achieve a more equitable distribution of public-sector jobs across the Province.

We should remember that it was the former Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, who first commissioned that task, and his successor, Nigel Dodds, who continues to carry that out, both of whom are Belfast representatives. The commencement of that process indicated that there must be new, fresh thinking about where public-sector jobs ought to be located.

The Member for Newry and Armagh Danny Kennedy is absolutely right to say that the report is a modest step. The proposals contained in the report can in no way be described as bold steps. That is because the sort and number of jobs represented account for about only 2% of total public-sector employment in the Province. To relocate 2% of current Civil Service posts is not the most significant or bold step to be taken. The proposals are modest, and their implementation ought not to be seen as a significant burden on any Department, or to be misinterpreted as the silver bullet and an answer to all the problems regarding the share and distribution of public-sector employment.

People who live in the areas that have been deliberately targeted in Mr Bain's report — Londonderry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena, and Coleraine — have good reason to want them to be identified as places where there should be employment. It is important that we scotch the rumour that Mr Bain has been offered the freedom of the borough in each of those areas. I know that he has accepted only one of them. It is important that people read about why those areas have been identified.

In recommendation 18 of the report, George Bain goes to some length to identify 13 bodies that should be candidates for relocation to those areas. The Department should examine those bodies and size them up with the various towns and cities mentioned in recommendation 12 to see where they best fit, and to try to achieve a pattern of distribution of new on-stream jobs, as they come about. That does not diminish the fact that when other bodies come online, under the redistribution of local government, they should also be considered in that way. That would be one way in which to implement that proposal and to see some of the opportunities, which have been quite rightly identified in the report, realised and delivered. The Assembly ought to be in the business of delivery; it should deliver a fair share of jobs in a more equitable way for the many people who live outside the greater Belfast area. That can be an endorsed achievement of the Assembly, provided that the report is handled in the appropriate way.

I agree that the report should not be seen as a constituency grab. That is why I am opposed to the initial motion. It is so selfish; it focuses only on certain areas as if they were the only ones that mattered. The report should be viewed from a strategic point of view. Northern Ireland must be viewed in its entirety to see

how best to distribute jobs across the Province. I hope that we can get to that point. I hope that Members do not view the issue, purely and simply, in a parochial way and say that the report is about jobs for one particular constituency over another. It must be seen in a much more strategic way.

The Minister and the Department will view and develop the report in that way, and they will deliver on that basis. Job redistribution and creation must be about helping localities, addressing travel-to-work issues, and ensuring that those who work in the public sector are given a fair say on, and share of, those jobs.

2.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The location and decentralisation of public-sector jobs has been a long-standing issue on which I think we would all agree that progress has been slow. The Bain Report, however, presents an important and substantive contribution to driving forward that agenda.

In July 2007, my Committee set out its initial thinking on the debate over the location of public-sector jobs as part of a wider report which also examined the direction of Workplace 2010, the accommodation project for the public service. The Bain Review arose directly from the Committee's report, and the terms of reference for the review reflected many of the Committee's recommendations, including: a strategic approach; an affirmative dispersal policy; sustainability; lessons to be learned from international experience of decentralisation; taking account of the regional economic strategy; and tackling economic disparities.

In terms of the economic and social imperative, the Committee noted that the regional economic strategy concluded that, even on a modest scale, dispersal could bring significant local economic benefits, support town-centre revitalisation and underpin and encourage private-sector investment. In its report, the Committee acknowledged the importance of the various guiding principles for public-sector jobs location, including: improving service delivery; taking account of staff interests; achieving value for money; and promoting equality and sustainable development.

The Committee placed particular emphasis on maximising social and economic benefits, although it was keenly aware, and acknowledged, that tensions could arise between some of the guiding principles. The core recommendation from the Committee was that, although the costs of dispersal are important — including the immediate investment requirements and shorter-term value-for-money considerations — the Department should give appropriate weighting to the longer-term strategic gains, including the potential of

dispersal as a tool for supporting the development of the regional economic hubs, and thereby closing the significant regional economic and prosperity gaps within Northern Ireland.

Following publication of Bain's report, the Committee was briefed by Professor Bain on 1 October. During the briefing, he emphasised that the key driver underpinning the review findings was regional economic balance — in other words, reducing the disparities in economic growth and social deprivation between areas. In selecting that as its key criterion, the review therefore aligned closely with the initial recommendations from the Finance and Personnel Committee. Professor Bain also issued a very explicit health warning and explained the limitations of the indicative cost modelling undertaken as part of his review. He pointed out that significant political will is required to implement relocation, because accurate cost-benefit forecasts for relocation will be difficult as the short-term costs are easier to quantify than the longer-term social and economic benefits. That is a very important point and a key consideration addressed by my Committee.

The Bain Report recommends that, in assessing the business case for each relocation proposal, the longer-term costs and benefits should receive primary consideration. We should recognise from the start that that would be a significant departure from the conventional approach to business-case appraisal, which follows the processes laid out in the Treasury's green book.

In terms of the overall number of Civil Service posts, the report proposes a modest and phased approach to relocation, as has been pointed out. The candidates proposed for relocation comprise approximately 5,500 posts, representing only 5% of the public-sector jobs currently based in the Belfast travel-to-work area alone; and 2% — as Ian Paisley Jnr pointed out — of the overall public sector. It is, however, a first step, and it is noteworthy that Bain has emphasised that the list of proposed relocation candidates is not exhaustive, and that a critical evaluation of the full range of public-sector organisations would identify other suitable candidates. The Finance and Personnel Committee will examine the response from the Minister and the Executive to the Bain recommendations and will monitor any subsequent implementation.

Sinn Féin supports the proposal from the SDLP, as it correctly and precisely identifies the consequences and reality of regional disparity and the necessary policy-driven actions that will address these inequities. We do not support the amendment, because it identifies the particular argument that opponents of change will rely on, which is the short-term approach. It also fails to

acknowledge the needs of the wider regional economy. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McQuillan: I am pleased to speak in the debate on an issue that is of direct significance to my constituency of East Londonderry. One of its major towns is Coleraine, which the Bain Report suggests could benefit from the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. That would be of tremendous benefit to many in my constituency, including those in Garvagh, Limavady and Kilrea, who commute to Belfast to work.

There are many people who live in other areas outside Belfast who are also forced to commute long distances each day because their jobs in the Civil Service are based in Belfast. Therefore, moving public-sector jobs to locations outside Belfast could reduce many of those journeys and alleviate the traffic problems that we encounter on the roads daily.

There are, however, many more details in the proposals that must be investigated. At a time when economic pressures are at the forefront of everyone's mind a scheme that could cost upwards of £50 million cannot be entered into lightly. A value-for-money principle must be uppermost in all our minds — we cannot throw our precious financial resources at the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs without being sure that there will be a good return for that investment. There are a huge number of issues in places such as Coleraine and Limavady, which would benefit from the investment of a tiny proportion of that money.

Other areas, such as Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, have already entered into a programme of decentralisation of public-sector jobs. We must learn from the problems those programmes faced; there is no point in blindly following the proposals. We must scrutinise the examples in other countries, learn about the problems that they encountered and ensure that we do not repeat their mistakes. The reason for comparing examples is to evaluate their benefits and pitfalls.

The greatest potential lies in the locating of new bodies in areas outside Belfast, which is what we should focus on. The decentralisation of other public-sector jobs can then be examined in the future, which is important as we have to take into account the current financial situation and the need for caution and value for money in every penny that we spend.

I welcome the Bain Report and the aims that it sets out for Northern Ireland. The decentralisation of public-sector jobs has the potential to kick-start the local economy and encourage inward investment in those areas that receive the jobs. Coleraine and Limavady could do with such investment, as could many areas in Northern Ireland. I urge caution in implementing any of the recommendations in the report. I support the amendment.

Mr K Robinson: I take the opportunity to apprise Members of the injustice that has been done to my East Antrim constituency over a considerable period. The Bain Report is only the latest example of how the East Antrim boroughs of Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne have been neglected, which may continue if the proposals in the report are implemented.

The underlying travel-to-work methodology used by Bain almost predetermines the outcome of the report. It also obscures the low level of public-sector employment in East Antrim by burying it in the Belfast travel-to-work area. Out of more than 219,000 public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland, East Antrim has only 5,171. In contrast the constituencies of North Belfast, South Antrim and North Antrim, which are immediately adjacent to East Antrim, have 15,000, 13,000 and 10,000 public-sector jobs respectively. That is only part of the story. The comparison between East Antrim and South Belfast reveals a staggering difference — South Belfast has 32,000 public-sector jobs, which is nearly six times the number in East Antrim.

It is also worth noting that, when the figures are analysed, all the constituencies that are west of the Bann have higher levels of public-sector employment than East Antrim — how else did East Antrim end up with the lowest level of public-sector jobs out of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland?

In East Antrim, the public sector represents only 10% of the workforce, compared with 62% in South Belfast, 45% in West Belfast, 42% in North Belfast and 30% in Foyle. The average percentage for constituencies across the UK is just over 20%, so how did East Antrim end up with only 10%? That is further evidence that, for decades, there has been a direct rule regime policy of preventing public-sector jobs going to East Antrim.

The massive underinvestment in public-sector jobs in East Antrim must be addressed by the Executive in the interests of equity and fair play. Surely, the Executive cannot preside over such ongoing discrimination against the area, which has the lowest level of public-sector employees out of Northern Ireland's 18 parliamentary constituencies.

The centres to which Bain proposes Government jobs are to be transferred already have high percentages of public-sector employment: Craigavon has 22%; Newry has 27%; and Omagh has 21.5%.

I want to examine the report's implications. The cost of job relocation has already been mentioned. Recommendation 19 suggests that 3,000 to 4,000 jobs be relocated, at an estimated cost of £10,000 per job. That totals £40 million. I ask Members who favour that suggestion to tell us from where that £40 million will come? Who will stand up and be prepared to take

that money from the education, housing or health budgets? That is the cost of relocation.

Examine the precedent that has been set with enforced relocations in Scotland. That situation is now being reviewed. In the Republic, where more than 11,000 people indicated initially that they might be willing to move, facts did not prove that. It turned out to be a glorious and expensive failure.

From an economic point of view, the public-service jobs that are currently held by residents, particularly in towns west of the Bann, already contribute to local economies — the so-called "hometown effect" that is referred to on page 92 of the report.

As a previous Member has noted, the presumption, in recommendation 14, against locating jobs in Belfast, is extremely short-sighted. The lack of experience that is available to proposed receiving locations, which was obvious when previous, small-scale relocations took place some time ago, would be replicated on a larger scale. That, together with staff's unwillingness to uproot their families during uncertain economic times, means that the inflow of experienced personnel would be limited, which would have a detrimental effect on the quality and service that is available to the public.

Although I have no problem with jobs moving to the best and most suitable locations for operational reasons, I have deep-seated reservations about the process of social engineering; especially because it would compound the injustice of the location of public-service jobs that has been inflicted upon my East Antrim constituency during the past 30 years.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad to take the opportunity to participate in the debate. I thank my colleague for bringing forward the motion.

I welcome the publication of Bain's 'Independent Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs'. In particular, I welcome the inclusion of Newry city as one of those locations. The relocation of public-sector jobs can, and must, signal that times have changed and that the Assembly and Executive are living up to their commitments to decentralise jobs from Belfast to towns and cities throughout the North. Newry has the infrastructure necessary to support the location of public-sector jobs. The political will is now needed to deliver on the report and to get on with implementing its recommendations.

Although I welcome the report's publication, I must also express reservations. I want to add Armagh city to the towns listed in the motion. I agree with much of what my fellow Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Kennedy said.

We are approaching 2011 and the completion of the review of public administration. Many towns and cities

face challenges as Government strive to reform the public sector. Many organisations will be merged or slimmed down as Government move to make the public sector more efficient.

Armagh's biggest employers are the Department of Education; the Southern Education and Library Board, whose headquarters is situated on the Mall; and the teachers' centre on the Newry Road. Other public services based in Armagh are Northern Ireland Water; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Between them, those organisations make up around 40% of all employment in the Armagh City and District Council area.

Indeed, Armagh was identified in the regional development strategy as a city that occupies a strategic location in the south of the region and embraces a significant cross-border dimension with good connections to the Irish midlands, Galway and Dublin. It is also within easy travelling time of regional ports and airports and the major urban centres of Belfast, Newry, Lisburn and Craigavon.

2.30 pm

Armagh city has the potential to develop further by utilising its city status, and building on its strengths as a centre of tourism, culture and public administration. However, unlike Derry, Newry, Omagh, Coleraine and Ballymena, all of which have a thriving private sector, Armagh has for many decades been a centre of public administration and depends heavily on public-sector jobs. I fear what the Bain Report could mean for Armagh if it is not challenged, and I am disappointed that Armagh has been overlooked by Sir George Bain and his team as a location for public-sector jobs.

Armagh is, and has been for many years, a subregional centre of administration — and that has not been reflected in the report. There is a possible double whammy for Armagh if no further investment is received and jobs leak out of the city. For example, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has been temporarily moved to Craigavon, but for over 30 years, the majority of those jobs had been based in Armagh. The decision on where to permanently locate those jobs may be influenced by the Bain Report, even though, essentially, that review was concerned with decentralising jobs out of Belfast. I think that it would be an irony, if not a tragedy, if Armagh lost jobs as a result of the review.

I have another concern about the availability of office accommodation for jobs that are being relocated. It would be a matter of huge hypocrisy — and a huge waste of public funds — if, in relocating public-sector jobs, the Executive did not utilise the office accommodation in the public sector. That office accommodation is available in Armagh. The Southern

Health and Social Services Board accommodation at the St Luke's and Longstone hospital sites are largely vacated, and could be redeployed in the relocation of public-sector jobs. The accommodation for that is there, and for a large element of the education and skills authority. I ask the Minister to meet us in Armagh to further discuss this issue.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Sinn Féin welcomes the recommendations of the Bain Report and hopes that all Departments will show the same enthusiasm as those with Ministers who are Sinn Féin members. Concrete proposals have been made by those three Departments in respect of NI Water, the education and skills authority, and the implementation of a policy of decentralisation in the Department of Agriculture.

The motion should not be limited to the problems faced by the three towns that it mentions — many areas of the North continue to suffer because of ongoing patterns of inequality and disadvantage. That reality was recognised by the Programme for Government, which 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 objective need.”

The relocation of public-sector jobs must be seen in the context of those commitments. The organised statistical data demonstrates where the areas of disadvantage are and, hence, where public-sector jobs should be located. For instance, if Members wish to examine that for themselves, the NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) measure of multiple deprivation for 2005 demonstrates that the most deprived areas of the Six Counties are predominantly within north and west Belfast and the greater Derry city area. Going into further detail, the NISRA statistics show that 19 of the top 100 most deprived wards are in Derry.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No; I do not have time.

The 2006 'Labour Force Survey Religion Report' reaffirms the persistent structural reality of geographical and regional inequalities, which have been inflicted on those citizens who live, in particular, in north and west Belfast, and west of the Bann. The relocation of public-sector jobs is an opportunity to begin redressing those inequalities.

Bearing all that in mind, I am not sure of the wisdom of limiting the remit of the motion to three towns. That is why I tabled an amendment calling for resources and efforts to be targeted at those with the greatest needs. I was disappointed that that amendment was not selected, as such an approach would have benefited not just Enniskillen, Cookstown and

Downpatrick, but all areas where objective need can be demonstrated.

Nevertheless, the substance of the motion recognises the genuine regional disparities in the North. As I said in the Chamber last week, Sinn Féin's firm view is that the reasons behind those inequalities are structural and systemic. Only when those inequalities have been addressed, in line with the Programme for Government's commitments, will all areas, including those named in the motion, begin to benefit.

Not everyone will agree with that analysis, but the harsh reality of life in some communities, as borne out by the statistics of deprivation, cannot be denied. It was recognised in Professor Bain's report and recently articulated by the regional director of the First Trust Bank when he outlined the dire economic position west of the Bann. I sincerely hope that all parties in the Assembly will also recognise that genuine deprivation and work with Sinn Féin in its efforts to build a modern economic agenda that recognises the interdependencies of sustainable economic growth and sustainable social improvement.

The relocation of public-sector jobs must play a pivotal role in that process. The DUP's amendment calls for the "consequences, including value for money" to be considered. One dictionary definition of consequence is a "penalty or cost". That portrays the DUP's negative mindset on the issue. A massive opportunity exists to make a genuinely meaningful impact on people's lives; it is not something to be feared. However, it seems that the DUP would rather hide behind the Treasury's green book and adopt the restrictive value-for-money approach. On its own, that approach will never allow for the type of innovative measures that are needed and were envisaged in the Programme for Government.

The location of public-sector jobs should be about more than value for money in the short term. Members must do what will be most advantageous in the long term to the economy and to the people whom they represent.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Anderson: I support the motion, but Sinn Féin does not support the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I thank the Members who took part in the debate, which confirmed the old saying that "all politics is local" and highlighted the range of views on the subject and its complexities. The location of public-sector jobs is not a straightforward matter; nor is there a straightforward solution, as is evident from Sir George's report, and he said that there is no right or wrong answer.

I take this opportunity to thank Sir George and his team for their thorough, detailed examination of a difficult and complex issue. I congratulate him on his highly professional approach and on the way in which he was able to distil the wide-ranging terms of reference into a manageable and focused piece of work. He provided an independent view of location that will inform the considerations of Government and Ministers. In doing so, he created a useful framework that will help to inform future decision-making. His report also facilitates a more focused discussion, as it sets out specific proposals and, importantly, evidence on which decisions can be made.

There is some interesting statistical evidence on the distribution of employment in Northern Ireland and the spread of public-sector jobs. Few would have believed, for example, that the number of public-sector jobs per 100 of the working-age population in the Omagh travel-to-work area is higher than in Belfast.

It is also interesting to reflect on the varying degrees of success and, in some cases, failure of attempted relocation elsewhere. Several Members, including Mr Hamilton, referred to the Irish Republic, which appears to provide a good case study in how not to go about it. The experience there led Sir George to conclude — extremely diplomatically — that caution must be exercised when proceeding with relocation. If one point stood out in the debate, it was the need to proceed with caution and common sense, and several Members wisely picked up on that. As Mr Kennedy said:

"Before we run with Bain, let us walk with common sense."

That is the approach that should be taken. Given what is happening, or, rather, not happening, in the Republic, it would be foolish to ignore Sir George's advice on that point.

The use of evidence to support the report's findings uncovers several issues that we must consider carefully. The report is comprehensive, except that it is missing any hard evidence of the long-term socio-economic benefits that relocation is expected to generate. That is not a criticism — no such evidence exists, and the report states that. Much has been said about how an injection of jobs can boost local economies and can lead to spillover effects such as increased confidence, reduced unemployment, improved work-life balance, and so on.

Sir George mentioned investing up to £40 million up front in the hope that we can realise longer-term benefits that may or may not materialise in 10 to 15 years' time. I am not suggesting that we do not aim to reduce economic disparity in Northern Ireland, and I have no problem with there being better regional balance. However, as several Members have indicated, we must consider the matter in the context of the

current difficult economic and financial circumstances. Difficult times require difficult choices. We must discuss affordability and the deployment of resources, and consider what priority to attach to the value-for-money case.

Northern Ireland is in the midst of a tight financial settlement that is likely to get tighter. Therefore, it is important to consider where the location of jobs fits with other priorities. Ken Robinson questioned where we will find the money for relocation. That is a legitimate question, not only in that context. It must be asked every time that a Member — from any party or any constituency — talks in the Chamber about new initiatives, new proposals and new expenditure. Northern Ireland is not like Whitehall or the Irish Republic. Unlike a sovereign country, our Budget is finite. Furthermore, as is the case in any devolved region, we have no borrowing requirements.

Therefore, when we propose new expenditure — as in this case — we must decide from where to access that money and whether the entire Budget has been allocated. That said, the Executive and the Assembly may decide to reprioritise and allocate the Budget to other projects. Moreover, we must decide which areas lose funding. No one in Northern Ireland is printing money.

Mr Kennedy: Not legally, anyway. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If Members are aware of individuals who are printing money, they should pass that information to the police immediately. *[Laughter.]* No one in my Department or in the rest of Government is printing money. That point is crucial to this debate and to all other debates on public expenditure.

We must consider how to proceed with some of the pilot projects. The report helpfully identifies locations to which we should consider relocating jobs. Furthermore, Sir George has earmarked several organisations that might be suitable candidates for relocation. Although I will not enter into a debate about the location of those jobs, the selection of those locations will, undoubtedly, be good news for some areas and disappointing news for others. That disappointment has been mentioned today.

However, the report's recommendations do not intend to locate public-sector jobs in every town and village in Northern Ireland. For every city and town that has been mentioned during the debate, dozens of areas have not been mentioned, and some representatives will question those omissions. Moreover, the report's recommendations do not intend to boost the local economy in the immediate vicinity of the six towns and cities that it mentions. Sir George has emphasised the ripple effect in the wider catchment areas, and he believes that to cluster jobs in a few areas will, potentially, encourage wider economic growth.

2.45 pm

The issue of who might move leads one to ask whether we are discussing "location" or "relocation". Several Members, including Mr McQuillan, made that point. Two distinct aspects must be considered. The first aspect is the location of public-sector jobs in the establishment of a new body. That includes the location of, for example, the administrative headquarters of institutions related to the review of public administration: indeed, the need for decisions on the RPA-related bodies was the catalyst for the review in the first place.

The second aspect is the relocation of established organisations, and that has the potential to introduce a new set of variables, including costs and disruption that may be caused to people and services. Although the report is not explicit on that point, I suspect that it may be at the heart of many of the difficulties that have been encountered by other relocation initiatives, which is why Sir George discussed the importance of phasing, human resources and industrial relations.

In making decisions, careful thought must be given to the way in which we proceed and with which projects. Those sorts of discussions must now take place. I must involve other Ministers, and so I have written to each of my Executive colleagues during the past week, asking them for their initial views on the report, including the principle of relocation; the implications for the early decisions that are needed on newly formed bodies and the RPA-related institutions; and the value-for-money case — because that is important. Ministers who wish to proceed will want to know where the money will come from. I understand that Sir George Bain has appeared before the Finance Committee.

I will put together the Ministers' replies, the views of the Finance Committee, and the points raised in the debate. I will then be in a better position to assess the degree of consensus on the proposals and to consider how best to develop a policy on location. That is why it is useful to have this debate, and I am grateful to the Members who tabled it for the opportunity to discuss the issues.

Several issues were raised, and I am unable to deal with them all. However, they will inform the discussion and consideration of the report. I stress that Sir George Bain and his panel have reported independently, and I am grateful to them. It now falls to the Executive and locally elected Members to make the decision.

Tommy Gallagher, who introduced the debate, mentioned that it was important that the Executive should meet. I totally agree with him. It is vital that the Executive should meet to discuss these matters. Although we do not meet, we can write to one another, but there will come a point at which we must discuss

things. Sinn Féin makes these points to the Assembly; it would do better to stop the blockade of the Executive and to make its points to the Executive.

Mr Hamilton made several important points and urged caution in approaching this matter. He spoke of the greater Belfast area, as did Mr Ken Robinson and Mr Lunn. The report indicates that the number of public-sector jobs recommended for relocation is sufficiently modest to ensure that Belfast will not be destabilised. However, the points made about the greater Belfast area are important and must be taken on board. The report does not fail to notice that 18 of the 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland are in Belfast — that point was made by Martina Anderson. As Members know, Belfast is the fourth most-deprived council area in Northern Ireland. That fact — together with the high number of public-sector jobs per 100 of the working-age population, for example, in Omagh — must be put into perspective.

We need to take out of the equation the mythology about what goes on in Northern Ireland and instil some hard facts. Evidence and facts are stubborn, but they are in the report, and that is why it is such a useful piece of work with regard to evidence gathering and the recommendations that it has made. However, the report is not the final say; the Executive will have the final say.

Mr Hamilton raised the issue of the impact of relocation on population groups that are under-represented in the public sector — young, Protestant males, for example. Policy formulation is subject to various impact assessments, including equality proofing. When the Executive initially commissioned the work, it was agreed that the appropriate equality proofing processes would be adhered to.

Cathal Boylan, Danny Kennedy and Dominic Bradley talked about Armagh city, so that argument was well and truly aired. In fact, some Members talked about Armagh city to the exclusion of any mention of Newry city. Not all Members from that constituency did that, but I was so moved by the eloquence of the Members who advocated Armagh city that I now think that there may be merit in completely dropping Newry city from the proposals. That illustrates that it is very difficult to accommodate every town and city.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that the Newry and Armagh constituency is uniquely served by the two wonderful cities of Armagh and Newry?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I could not agree more. Having heard all the contributions from representatives of other constituencies, I am sure that the Member does not suggest that two locations for public-sector jobs should be situated in his constituency. It is already planned that one location will be situated in the Newry and Armagh constituency.

In all seriousness, this is a complicated and difficult issue. It is not possible to relocate public-sector jobs to every single town and city — it is a matter of achieving the best possible balance.

Ian Paisley Jnr believes that the proposals are modest. They are; and that is a fact that Sir George very openly acknowledges. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel talked about giving weight to longer-term gains — a point that was also made by Martina Anderson, and I accept that. Sir George said that those gains will be difficult to quantify, but, nevertheless, it is an issue of importance.

Adrian McQuillan stated that the proposals should represent value for money, which was a recurring theme in the debate. Ken Robinson — quite rightly — talked about his own constituency of East Antrim. The proximity of that constituency to Belfast has a bearing on the issues that he raised. He also referred to the matter of where the money would come from to implement the proposals. I already dealt with that point at considerable length.

In closing, the points about Enniskillen, Cookstown and Downpatrick were well aired. The issues about infrastructure are the responsibilities of another Minister, but I look forward to considering all those issues in due course as we reach our final decisions.

Mr Weir: I am delighted to contribute to this very important motion. Listening to some of the passionate arguments that were made, one wondered whether the issue was about the relocation of public-sector jobs from Belfast, or whether the focus was on the relocation of public-sector jobs from Armagh. That seemed to be where the focus of the debate was.

With a debate of this nature, there was the danger that Members would engage in a degree of constituency self-interest. At the outset, I stress that that is a trap that I am also very determined to fall into, as I will advocate the advantage of locating public-sector jobs in the North Down area.

As indicated in the amendment, the DUP believes that the Bain Report has made a very valuable contribution to this debate, so we are not critical of the report itself. However, Mr Paisley Jnr indicated that the report was not a silver bullet that would solve all our problems. Indeed, that was something that Sir George also indicated when he said that there were no right or wrong answers to this issue. It is important that we weigh up the issues with a degree of seriousness and caution.

I have three main criticisms of the original motion. First, it argues for the immediate relocation of public-sector jobs without any real consideration of what needs to be done, so the motion lacks the necessary financial prudence. Secondly, it narrowly focuses on three towns — an argument that other Members also

made. Thirdly, if taken at face value, the motion will perpetuate the vicious cycle that the proposer spoke about, because there is a very real danger that the well will be dry by the time that improvements are made to the road networks around those towns. Therefore, the motion is rather self-defeating.

Mr Hamilton, Mr Lunn and George Robinson spoke about the report's failure to consider relocation within greater Belfast. I come from Bangor, and I see traffic congestion in towns such as Bangor and Newtownards and in greater Belfast, and there are social and, indeed, environmental benefits to be gained from ensuring that some jobs are relocated along the spokes of the Belfast wheel.

Mr Hamilton mentioned value for money and, despite Ms Anderson's and other Members' attempts to dismiss the matter, if, at a time when front-line services are under pressure, we proceed headlong to spend £40 million on relocating those jobs without conducting any cost-benefit analysis, people will consider us to be mad. We must concentrate on the cost of implementing the proposals.

George Robinson and Mr Kennedy rightly said that travel-to-work areas form a poor basis from which to judge where to locate jobs. Furthermore, several Members mentioned the fact that, although there can be a presumption in favour of certain towns when deciding where to locate new public-sector jobs, job relocation poses major problems. We are not talking about shifting money between different bank accounts; we are talking about moving human beings. When considering the relocation of jobs, we must bear in mind the fact that some people may lose their jobs or have to move to a different area, and that has not been adequately considered by many Members.

I take on board Mr Kennedy's point that we must walk with common sense before we run with Bain, so we must proceed with caution.

Ms Anderson said that we must tackle inequality and disadvantage, and I could not agree more. However — this point has already been made — if we focus on that rather than on relocating jobs, there is a strong argument for more jobs being located in certain parts of Belfast, because those areas suffer from the greatest levels of disadvantage. In addition, the greatest area of under-representation in the Civil Service is among young Protestant males. We must bear in mind that, by tackling one regional inequality, we might be in danger of worsening another inequality in the system. Consequently, we must get this right.

Mr McQuillan, Mr Paisley Jnr and others mentioned the mistakes that have been made in the Irish Republic and in Scotland, and we must learn from those mistakes and approach this matter with some caution.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Weir: We must get this right, and, consequently, I support the amendment.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Kennedy: Let Tommy finish. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Perhaps, Mr Speaker, you will allow me some additional time because of that intervention. *[Laughter.]*

I support the motion. I listened intently to the debate, and I noted several points that were made. Mr Hamilton did not disagree with many of the Bain Report's conclusions. In fact, he advocated a phased approach to proceeding in a modest and prudent manner, which is exactly what the report suggests, and the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel elucidated on that point.

Although adopting the SDLP motion would result in major benefits, I agree with the Minister of Finance and Personnel that there are economic concerns that are difficult to tabulate and discern. Relocating public-sector jobs would, however, generate environmental benefits.

Much has been made of other economies, and Mr Hamilton referred to the situation south of the border, where the fact that public servants' jobs and homes were relocated to places where they did not particularly wish to go was a major concern.

Some Members sought to articulate such opinions about where Mr Gallagher and I come from. Yet day and daily, hundreds — if not thousands — of people travel from there, up and down the motorways, at a cost to themselves, society and, if it were to be investigated, the environment.

Mr Hamilton spoke about a conversation that he had had with a constituent concerning Northern Ireland Water. In my experience, Northern Ireland Water has closed one local office after another, and, where I come from, the local press has drawn attention to the fact that it may shed a further 200 jobs.

Those issues must be examined; however, we must examine them factually, not through others' perceptions.

3.00 pm

Mr Boylan was the first person to make the case for the relocation of public-sector jobs to Armagh city. However, as his party colleague, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr McLaughlin, said, the list of proposed relocation candidates is not exhaustive — as Mr Kennedy agreed. There could be some reconsideration.

Mr Kennedy argued for the adoption of the Bain Report. Certain elements are not in the report that may yet be included in it, so we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I really cannot.

Mr McLaughlin: He has to leave room for Tommy — *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: I have to leave room for Tommy, indeed.

I listened carefully to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. He said that the Committee was briefed by the authors of the report on 1 October 2008 and that the report aligned closely with the initial recommendations of the Committee.

I am not sure where those members of the Committee now stand who at first aligned themselves with the recommendations of the report but who now oppose its merits. That is politics, I suppose.

The Bain Report was seen as the first step in a modest and phased approach to the relocation of public-sector jobs, and the list of possible locations was not exhaustive. That has been amply covered.

Mr McQuillan referred to the decentralisation of jobs to Coleraine; in fact, he and other Members articulated the case for the decentralisation of jobs and for the Bain recommendations.

Mr Ken Robinson made an excellent case for the decentralisation of jobs to the East Antrim constituency; he had made a very good argument, only to say that a financial case could be used against it. Members must consider whether they are in favour of Bain's proposals to extend the list of locations for the benefit of their constituencies or whether they are making an argument to contain the effects of the report.

My colleague Dominic Bradley mentioned the case for the cities of Newry and Armagh, which, of course the SDLP fully supports —

Mr Kennedy: They are not in your motion —

Mr McGlone: They are not in the motion, but they are in the spirit of it.

I also listened carefully to the Minister, who told us that the report was thorough and detailed and that it would be foolish of us to ignore Sir George's advice. The Minister also dealt with the socio-economic benefits of relocating public-sector jobs and the investment of £40 million upfront.

We are all aware of the present difficult economic circumstances, so where will the new money come from? The Minister referred to financial constraints; however, potential investment or political creativity should never be inhibited by what an accountant says. *[Interruption.]* There are different ways of looking at investment and potentials and what they may realise down the line.

Mr Weir referred to the danger of focusing on three towns; however, that is not what the motion is about. The motion focuses on the recommendations of the Bain Report and, in that context, those three towns west of the Bann. Surely, we do not want to perpetuate a vicious cycle of no investment, no roads and no jobs.

That is precisely why the Bain Report is before us today; it is why I am making this point, and it is why the motion is being debated today. There has been endemic neglect of those areas, and this is one way of trying to provide reinvestment and make best use of the properties that have been left vacant by the removal of public-sector jobs from such towns as Enniskillen, Cookstown, Maghera and Magherafelt.

Ms Ritchie: What about Downpatrick?

Mr McGlone: Downpatrick also, as the Minister has reminded me.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: No — well, just briefly.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that, under the proposals, East Antrim is in danger of being left with health centres and job centres?

Mr McGlone: I realise that, and I welcome Mr Beggs's comments, which articulate amply my argument for the motion and my support for the Bain Report and its recommendations. We must look at relocation, the decentralisation of services and why people have to travel to their work in Belfast everyday. One must not think that everybody who works in Belfast lives in Belfast; that is a false notion. Many Members are visited daily by constituents who, due to economic and family circumstances, want to be transferred closer to home.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Member agree that his comments in relation to the problem being more accentuated in the greater Belfast area — outside the city — supports what some Members, including myself, said earlier about the omission of greater Belfast and movement within that area being a flaw in the report?

Mr McGlone: I hear what the Member is saying, but, ultimately, the basis of the report is the relocation of public-sector jobs, the vast majority of which are located centrally in Belfast. I am not saying that asking for relocation means that everybody who works in Belfast must be moved out. There may well be Departments and jobs that would be best served by having a Belfast location. That consideration must not be ignored, and it would be foolish to do so.

I accept what Mr McLaughlin said about the report proposing a modest and phased approach: that is what the report is concerned with. We must get to the position in which the needs of the community are

being accommodated and where its economic and social needs and environmental concerns are being met, through a modest and phased approach, which forms the basis of the report.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 29.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hamilton and Mr McQuillan.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dallat and Mrs D Kelly.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Bain Report on the location of public sector jobs and welcomes its contents and conclusions as an important contribution to the ongoing debate on this issue, and calls upon the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report to the Executive and the Assembly in a timely manner, having carefully considered the various consequences, including value for money, of the Report's recommendations, with views on how this matter may be addressed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Supporting People Fund

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 in which to make a 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 for Social Development to review the current budget for the Supporting People fund to include inflationary increases, so that the programme's existing sustainability and quality of service is not put at risk.

The Supporting People programme was introduced in Northern Ireland in April 2003 as a UK-wide reform to separate support services from housing benefits and to centralise several funding streams into a single budget. Supporting People aims to provide housing-support services to enable vulnerable people to access and maintain accommodation that is suitable to their needs and to help them to fulfil their capacity to live as independently as possible. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive administers the programme and works in partnership with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the four health and social services boards and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to commission housing-related support services.

In Northern Ireland, there are 121 providers that deliver services in more than 900 accommodation schemes. There are also 84 floating-support-service schemes throughout the Province. Those services provide some 23,000 of Northern Ireland's most vulnerable people with advocacy and practical and emotional support, such as providing wardens in a sheltered-housing scheme as well as housing-related advice services.

Supporting People funding is available to people in hostels and to those in short-term, move-on or temporary accommodation. It is also available to people in their own homes, sheltered dwellings, houses of multiple occupation, and clustered housing. The programme helps client groups with learning disabilities, mental ill health, physical and sensory disabilities, addictions, criminal convictions, and those who suffer from domestic violence or who are homeless. Many schemes also work with older people, vulnerable young people, young people leaving care, black and minority ethnic communities, refugees and asylum seekers, and lesbian and gay people.

One of the principles of Supporting People stipulates that its services must represent value for money. It is clear that Supporting People's services —

which are provided mainly by the voluntary sector — are cost-effective in that they keep people out of institutions such as hospitals, residential homes and prisons. The organisation's schemes have been accredited for good governance and quality assurance by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Since the establishment of the programme, its services have expanded and its budget has grown from an initial £44 million to £61 million for the 2008-09 financial year.

An annual inflationary uplift has been awarded to most supported-housing services over the years. However, in April 2008, the Housing Executive announced that the Supporting People budget would receive no inflationary increase for the financial years 2008-2011. As a result, the budget has been set at a baseline of £61 million per annum for those three years. The Housing Executive's justification for that decision was that there were underspends in the programme in the previous three years.

However, the Housing Executive admitted that those underspends were largely due to delays in the completion of housing association newbuild schemes, for which Supporting People had budgeted revenue costs that could not be drawn down for expenditure. Given the escalating costs of overheads and of salary increases faced by supported-housing providers, the freezing of Supporting People funding amounts to net cuts. Organisations are asked to deliver services under existing contractual agreements with the Housing Executive for less money against a rising tide of costs. That flies in the face of Positive Steps — a policy to promote partnership-working between the Government and the voluntary sector.

Organisations in the voluntary sector stated that they had already absorbed above-inflation cost rises in the past few years; that further financial constraints would jeopardise the quality of their services and, ultimately, put at risk the most vulnerable. A survey conducted in September 2008 by the Council for the Homeless and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, regarding the likely effect of reductions in Supporting People funding, indicated serious concerns in the sector over the sustainability of current schemes.

The findings show that by 2010-11 an estimated 73% of respondents' schemes will be in deficit. Of those, at least 50% will be in deficit due directly to shortfalls in Supporting People funding. By the end of 2011, respondents estimated that 14% of the schemes would be at risk and that the organisations involved would seek to withdraw from their Supporting People contracts. The survey also found that 39% of respondents thought that there would be a decline by 2010-11 in the proportion of the Supporting People budget spent in relation to the number of hours of housing support delivered. That will have direct implications for performance quality and safety.

It is also difficult to envisage how further cuts can be made by organisations that are committed to minimum standards. Some 59% of those surveyed believe that staffing levels will probably decrease. At the moment, about 75% of organisations' budgets pay support workers' salaries. Organisations committed to NJC scales and to incremental salary increases fear that they will have to choose between increasing wages and employing fewer staff or maintaining wage levels and losing well-trained staff. Undoubtedly, both options will have a detrimental effect on tenants. Furthermore, the survey shows that most organisations anticipate a reduction in the training and development of staff, which will have long-term negative consequences for the future quality and development of schemes. Overall, larger organisations may have more flexibility in sharing resources, but, for smaller providers, cross-subsidising or pooling courses may not be possible.

In conclusion, the flatlining of Supporting People funding will damage the quality of services to the most vulnerable. We urge the Minister to find the means to defrost the freeze on the ban on allowing inflationary increases for such valuable services. In the medium term, the sector would benefit from departmental approval of any inflationary uplift for 2008-09. If that is not an option, the Minister must ring-fence for uplift any additional funds realised as part of the in-year monitoring rounds.

Supporting People funding for existing schemes must be increased by at least the rate of inflation in 2009-10 and 2010-11. We suggest to the Minister that, in future years, any unavoidable underspends in the Supporting People budget should either be spent on relevant non-recurring items of expenditure, such as staff training, or should be carried into following years. It would seem prudent for the Supporting People budget to be agreed on a three-year rolling cycle to enable long-term financial planning and projections. That would provide some stability for the sector, which has been a valuable resource to the community.

3.30 pm

Miss McIlveen: As Members have already heard, Supporting People plays a vital role in enabling some of the most vulnerable adults and young people to live in the community. It is a crucial link in delivering community care and in enabling those at risk of homelessness to access supported housing. As such, the voluntary agencies that are involved in delivering the Supporting People programme provide the kind of care and housing support that allow many of our most vulnerable citizens to be more fully included in our community.

A substantial number of the young people who access Supporting People come from a care background and require focused and intensive support to enable them to

gain the skills of independent living. I had the privilege of visiting a voluntary provider of such services and meeting a group of young people living in accommodation provided under Supporting People. I listened to their stories and saw for myself how important it is that such care and support is available in a housing setting. Most of those people were without family support, and many had experienced very difficult and sometimes traumatic childhoods. However, most of them were in work or training, and, with the help available from services provided under the Supporting People fund — in conjunction with health and social care trust schemes — they were trying to improve their lives. When young people work extremely hard to overcome the difficulties that they have faced, it is imperative that we support essential front-line services.

Structural funding issues around Supporting People were identified in the Semple Review, and providers have indicated that they continue to be problematic. In particular, the review identified wrangling between Supporting People and housing benefit over reapportionment of costs. Providers have indicated that decisions regarding who funds the care and Supporting People costs for young people were causing difficulty. There is a need for greater clarity about the interface between care and housing, and how costs can be allocated in a way that supports the best interests of young people.

On several occasions, we have debated the issue of young adults in Muckamore Abbey Hospital and their right to live and be supported in the community. We have debated the Bamford Review and endorsed its call for a reduction in the number of adults with learning difficulties living in hospitals. However, we cannot achieve that without the correct support and without ensuring that we are willing to provide adequate and appropriate funding. If we do not address the need for additional supported housing services now, we will find ourselves still discussing the needs of adults with learning difficulties in five years' time without having made any real difference.

It is impossible for voluntary providers of services to continue, year on year, without any inflationary uplift, as, in effect, we are asking them to continue with a reduction in funding. No cost-of-living increase was awarded to service providers this year, and, as we have heard, many providers are considering reductions in front-line services to extremely vulnerable people if additional funding does not become available. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, the Committee for Social Development had a presentation at one of its informal receptions from the Triangle Housing Association, which indicated just that.

It seems somewhat contradictory that the Minister has indicated that some of the Supporting People budget was handed back in previous years, yet

providers say that they have faced difficulties in securing funding for new projects or in extending current projects. Some of the difficulties seem to be attributable to the lack of facilities for carrying forward expenditure and little ability to reallocate within the existing year's expenditure. Surely that is a practical issue that must be addressed. My understanding is that a review of the five-year social housing development programme shows that the overall number of supported housing schemes is in decline.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that there are not enough schemes to meet existing need, let alone address the additional needs that would be generated by the implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

Failure to address the legitimate concerns of providers about the need for an inflationary increase — and for more funding overall — will lead to the closure or retraction of some schemes at a time when more provision is clearly required. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable people in society are given priority and are addressed.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In my experience, when it comes to cutting budgets, the services that provide for the people who are most in need in society are, invariably, the first to be axed. In the case of the Supporting People fund, we are told that what is being proposed is merely a freeze on inflationary increases, which will not affect programmes that are already up and running. Furthermore, we are told, service providers can draw on reserves to make up any shortfall. That is utter rubbish. Those with responsibility for managing budgets must consider the impact that cuts will have on those people who rely on services provided by the Supporting People fund. Those services can provide a lifeline for people who totally depend on those resources to survive.

It is understandable that at a time such as this, when the credit crunch is having a detrimental effect on all in society, everyone should tighten their belts. However, how can people who are lying in the street with nowhere to go, or those suffering from mental illness, tighten their belts?

The Supporting People fund was introduced by the Housing Executive in the North of Ireland in 2003 in order to provide a lifeline for vulnerable people in our communities. The fund's objectives sought to enable vulnerable people to live independently, to promote their inclusion in wider society and to develop a partnership with statutory agencies, service users and providers.

Many networks have been built over the years to deliver services under the Supporting People banner. Those organisations have now been informed that they will suffer inflationary freezes for the next three years. None of those organisations were prepared for that

announcement, and many of them now believe that their ability to deliver services will be seriously affected. Much-needed programmes and valuable staff will be lost, which will ultimately have an impact on vulnerable groups of people, such as those who are homeless or mentally ill, elderly people and young people.

Several months ago, I was told that efficiency savings would not affect essential community programmes. I took the opportunity to raise the issue of the Supporting People fund at last week's meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I asked whether it was intended that efficiency cuts would affect those people who are most in need in society, and I was told that that was not the case. I was informed that it was up to the Minister of the relevant Department to decide where savings would be made.

I raised the issue again at last week's meeting of the Committee for Social Development, and asked that the Simon Community, among others, be invited to give evidence to the Committee on how those efficiency cuts will affect their ability to deliver services to the wider community. One of the reasons given as the rationale for the cuts was the underspend in the Supporting People fund's budget between 2004-05 and 2006-07. However, the officials failed to say that most of that was due to programme slippage in the housing associations' newbuild programme, which affected the ability of Supporting People schemes to draw down funding.

The Welcome Centre, which is in my constituency, relies heavily on the Supporting People fund. It provides a place of security where homeless people can gain access to essential basic services, and provides hot meals and bedding for people who are sleeping rough in Belfast. Those projects could become victims of cuts to inflationary increases. If that is the case, what will become of those people who rely on such an excellent and vital service?

Those are only two of at least 900 schemes that provide services under the Supporting People fund for an estimated 23,000 people. Other programmes cater for individuals suffering from substance and drug abuse or provide staff who facilitate the programmes that are necessary to stimulate activity for elderly people who live in sheltered dwellings.

Many Members are familiar with the work of the Simon Community and the huge role that it plays in provision for the homeless. The proposed freeze on inflationary increases over the next three years will seriously affect the Simon Community's ability to cover salary increases, which will then result in greater financial pressure on the organisation to raise funds.

That will particularly affect its ability to function effectively in years two and three. In addition, the homelessness sector is currently subject to a major review and modernisation agenda through the

publication of the Housing Executive's homelessness strategy, which will include a review of supported accommodation. It is imperative that the underlying financial stability exists to support the sector to negotiate any change agenda.

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

Mr F McCann: When all is said and done, a serious mistake has been made by the Departments involved in the resourcing of the Supporting People programme, and their actions have caused panic in the sector.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very important debate. In our response to the Budget in January 2008, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced support for the Supporting People scheme, and raised concerns that the budget allocated for the scheme would be inadequate. The Supporting People scheme, which was established in 2003, and is implemented locally by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, is a progressive way of delivering housing support services for vulnerable sections of society through the use of the voluntary and private sectors, and is more cost-effective than relying on statutory services.

The programme funds a range of supported housing services in over 900 schemes, which assist approximately 23,000 people to improve their quality of life and attain independence by living in their community, rather than facing the prospect of spending years shut away in care homes. There are 11 main client populations, including those with a learning disability or mental-health problems, victims of domestic violence, older people and vulnerable young people. It is crystal clear that those are the very people who are least able to look after themselves, and who should receive assistance from society.

In our response to the Budget, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced particular concerns regarding the need to develop a new sheltered housing pilot scheme for adults with learning difficulties, many of whom are being cared for by ageing parents who maintain that role with increasing difficulty.

Supporting People programmes cut across departmental lines — I know that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been involved in various projects, and the health and social care trusts have been involved in resettling long-stay patients from mental-health and learning-disability hospitals into appropriate places in the community.

The sums involved are considerable. Between 2004 and 2007, some £10.6 million was allocated to accommodation and supporting services for victims of domestic violence, and the total amount allocated to the Supporting People programme in 2004-05 was nearly £49 million. It is absolutely crucial that the Supporting People budget for the financial years

2008-11 is increased in line with inflation. Failure to achieve that has caused fears relating to staff retention and staff recruitment, as 75% of Supporting People funding goes towards the salaries of housing support workers.

Mr A Maginness: I have great respect for Ms Lo, and I understand the points that she raised. However, I think that some of the worries that she expressed are misplaced. The current position is that £61 million has been granted for each of the next three financial years, amounting to £183 million. That represents an increase of £3 million on the budget for last year — determined under direct rule — which was £58 million. Given that uplift, it seems that her concerns are misplaced, or premature.

The Department and the Minister are committed to maintaining this vital service for the most vulnerable people in society. At least 23,000 people benefit from the scheme, and it is a scheme that all of us in this House fully support. I reiterate what other Members already said about the scheme and its importance for vulnerable people in the community.

3.45 pm

Mr F McCann: Is the Member saying that the Simon Community, and the many other groups that deal with Supporting People, have nothing to worry about?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional one minute in which to speak.

Mr A Maginness: I am not saying that any group has nothing to worry about; I am simply pointing out that Supporting People has received a substantial uplift in funding. When Mr Fra McCann spoke earlier, he may have confused efficiency savings with what he termed as inflationary cuts. The Supporting People scheme has been exempt from any efficiency cuts; they do not apply to that scheme. Efficiency cuts of 3% apply uniformly throughout many other schemes in the budget of the Department for Social Development, and of other Departments. That helpful element is inbuilt into the Supporting People programme, exempting it from any cuts. That should, in itself, be a sufficient safeguard.

Ms Lo is quite right to say that Supporting People will be subject to rising costs. It is important that the Department monitors those and ensures that the net value of the programme is maintained so that the services that it presently supports are not put in danger. In fact, if there were any risk of that, one would hope that the Department and the Minister would avail themselves of in-year monitoring in order to assist the scheme if necessary.

The programme has not been affected by efficiency-savings cuts, which has allowed flexibility. Funding for the programme has, in fact, been substantially increased. That will safeguard the future of the scheme,

and I hope that that will satisfy and reassure those organisations that are genuinely concerned about the situation.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to the comments of Mr Maginness on the additional money for the Supporting People fund. The Simon Community and other organisations have spoken to me and other members of the Committee for Social Development. Figures can be bandied about, but those organisations have genuine fears that their funding has, according to them, been capped. Only the Minister knows whether that is a true reflection of the situation.

Those voluntary organisations face the problem of high staffing levels. They rely heavily on their staff, and wage increases this year will become a severe problem. Anna Lo has a valid point in that the real problem is that the sector cannot be expected to live without inflationary increases and still maintain the levels of support that it has provided to the community. Civil servants from the Department for Social Development have told the Committee that the Housing Executive is unable to deliver the housing programme under the Supporting People fund.

What was not made clear at those Committee meetings were the reasons behind the programme's lack of delivery. The reasons were not attributable to the Housing Executive. If anyone was to blame, it was the Planning Service, and there was a classic example of that in my constituency, where Trinity Housing was building five special-needs houses. The project kicked off approximately three years ago with the full support of the community and me. The project took five years to deliver — and one would question why it took five years to deliver six houses — because the Planning Service argued for two years about the size of kitchens.

That shows how ridiculous the system is in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, it led to slippages in the programme, and that is what the Housing Executive has been up against for the past two or three years: when it allocates bills, planning causes severe troubles, and the programme slips.

What happens to the money that slips in that year? Is it put into the following year's funding? I do not believe that to be the case, but perhaps the Minister will be able to clarify that. Therefore, there is a knock-on effect that gathers pace each year, and it is a difficulty for the Housing Executive in delivering the programme that it hoped to deliver. However, the failing is not the fault of the Housing Executive. It is, unfortunately, attributable to other Departments.

A number of months ago, the House heard the Minister of Health deliver his report on the Bamford Review, towards which he allocated £44 million for community-based services. That is all about getting people out of institutionalised care and back into the

community. However, therein lies the conundrum: how can those people be returned into the community if the housing build for those special-needs people is continually slipping? Perhaps the Minister needs to examine that situation, provide additional support to the project, and speak to the Planning Service in order to try to expedite that housing build.

However, there is a situation out there among those bodies whereby they believe that they are facing problems and cuts in services. Perhaps that is an issue that the Minister needs to re-address with those groups. I commend the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When the direct rule Social Development Minister, David Hanson, launched the Supporting People strategy, he said:

"Supported housing services have an important role to play in helping vulnerable people live independent lives in the community and reducing homelessness. In the past, services available were determined by the requirements of the funder rather than the needs of the individual. The Supporting People Strategy, which is underpinned by significant Government funding, is a clear indication of how we have moved to a situation whereby the provision of support services is determined by the needs of individuals and not by the requirements of funding sources."

Let me tell the Assembly about the experience of one group who believe that the Supporting People strategy is not working for them. At Muckamore Abbey Hospital, there is a group of patients called "Tell it like it is". They started a training course to learn how to speak to the public and politicians in order to communicate about their lives and their hopes for the future. Each member of the group has been told that they are ready to be discharged from hospital. However, they, and many more patients like them at Muckamore, have been unable to set up home in the community because the right level of support is not available.

I met Sammy, who has been waiting for two years to be discharged, and Richard, who has been waiting for six years. However, for various reasons, they have not been able to be safely placed and supported in the community. As a result, they are, effectively, prisoners in the hospital.

The Health Committee visited Muckamore in order to see at first hand the situation for those who have experienced serious delay in being discharged. It was clear to Committee members that we must have a cross-departmental approach in order to ensure that those who are ready for discharge are given every support to live independently in the community.

The people at Muckamore are not the only section of society that is affected. There are, as Members have said, numerous vulnerable people who are being let down by the Supporting People fund. Among the groups who benefit from the fund are women who need support as a result of, perhaps, domestic violence,

or who need a safe and secure environment to be available when necessary. Withheld or inadequate financial support will lead to a reduction in services and put those women in a more vulnerable position.

My colleague Carál Ní Chuilín and I visited some young women in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre who hoped to find a place in society and to be supported on their release. I also have concerns that those women's hopes will not be realised. We must ensure that we develop services, in line with service users' aspirations, to help those women settle back into society and to get the support that they need.

I support the motion, because many sections of society require the help of the Supporting People fund. I urge the Minister for Social Development not to let those people down.

Mr Beggs: The Supporting People fund, which is a UK-wide programme, has reformed the way in which housing support services have been commissioned and funded. Before 2003, services were deployed largely on an ad hoc basis, sometimes commissioned by statutory agencies, but mostly arising as a result of lobbying, and no small amount of innovation, by the voluntary sector.

The Supporting People fund has given strategic direction, stability and sustainability to housing support in Northern Ireland. That has resulted in significant benefits to vulnerable individuals, as well as cost benefits to Government services such as the Health Service. The fund has also helped to prevent some young people from entering the criminal-justice system. Without the help, support and guidance provided through the fund, those people may have gone down that route.

In April 2008, the announcement that the Supporting People fund was to receive no inflationary increase for the financial years 2008-11 has put the fund in serious jeopardy, the cost of which may be significant to individuals and the Government. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the current situation of financial constraint; however, in this instance, there is a danger of being penny wise and pound foolish. The voluntary sector, in particular, adds to the fund from its own resources. Often, volunteers' contributions go far beyond that for which they are contracted. Why should we put that sector at risk?

The Supporting People fund, through strategic housing support that various organisations administer, improves the quality of life for vulnerable families, children and young people, and the elderly, and enables them to interact with, and often to reintegrate into, the wider community.

The fund is particularly geared towards people who are in danger of becoming homeless. I have an interest in the issue of children and young people. Early

support can often assist vulnerable young people, such as those leaving care, to integrate into and contribute fully to society. Those people need additional support during that critical period in their lives when they leave a stable institutional setting and go out into the world on their own.

The ability to maintain tenancy or to remain at one's own home can also stop people from becoming a burden on other parts of health and social services. That service is critical for young people who are leaving care, or who have learning difficulties, poor health or mental-health problems, and who want to live independently from their parents, many of whom may also be in poor health.

Young people who have been through the criminal-justice system must be reintegrated into society. The adaptability of the service to meet individuals' needs is crucial if we are to break the cycle of criminality. That is something that we want to succeed.

I accept that, when there have been no inflationary pressures, the fund has not been subject to efficiency cuts, as the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said. However, it is obvious that actual costs will be passed on to service providers, for which they cannot pay.

The decision not to give an inflationary increase in real terms is a cut to funding. Real concerns exist that that will have a destabilising effect on the sector as it faces those significant inflationary pressures. Voluntary organisations have entered into contracts with the Department for service-provision standards, and enhanced regulatory compliance, but they are then often put in a legally difficult position as they face what is effectively reduced funding.

Many staff in that sector are tied to the NJC pay scales. Savings may be possible only, therefore, through job cuts and, effectively, loss of support.

4.00 pm

I urge the Minister to liaise carefully with service providers so that the implications of what effectively represents a cut do not put services at risk. There is a danger that organisations will start to tailor their provisions to funding requirements, instead of individuals' needs. The programme is progressive, and it is vital that it continue. We should not make short-term investments in this area. I urge the Minister to liaise with the Finance Minister to ensure that the inflationary increases can subsequently be met in budgetary considerations.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP was founded on the principles of equality and social justice. Many people across the community will agree with me when I say that, in Margaret Ritchie, we have a Minister who genuinely listens to the concerns of people from all sections of our society — particularly the community

and voluntary sector, which is under particular stress at a challenging time for all sectors of our community.

Not many people foresaw the extent of the current economic crisis as it has developed in recent weeks. It is, therefore, commendable that the Minister, despite the advice that she received from Mr Fra McCann to accept her lot in the Budget debate of October 2007, was successful in drawing an additional £3 million into a budget that was underspent. Many of us would ask why we are adding money to an underspent budget.

The Minister knows that Supporting People is a matter of social justice. There are many vulnerable people in our community, and the SDLP is serious about ensuring a greater access to wealth and better health outcomes for those living in poverty. It is most unfortunate that, due to the failure of the Executive to meet, we do not have an anti-poverty strategy that the Minister for Social Development could work within to tackle the real issues facing the most vulnerable in our society.

It is also true that, although the Housing Executive is the main administrator of Supporting People, the commissioning of services generally falls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As someone who worked in health and social services for 22 years, I believe that there is disjointedness — a crack in the pavement — in the integration of services.

At least under devolution there is an opportunity for Ministers to work together and with officials to ensure that everything works smoothly. It is interesting to note that, when there was a great debate in 2006 about whether Supporting People should be transferred to local councils along with housing powers, the Housing Council chairperson, Dineen Walker, said that her organisation thought it:

“difficult to justify the transfer of this critical function to new councils who have no previous expertise. It will cause confusion and disruption to an otherwise well-administered service to the public.”

The key words are “well-administered service to the public”, and bearing in mind that the Department for Social Development administers that service, that is praise indeed. As Members are aware, all parties are represented on the Housing Council, and the chairperson would not have issued such a press statement if she did not have the support of her fellow members on the Housing Council.

I am sure that, in her reply to the debate, the Minister will take on board the concerns that Members have expressed, and will reflect on the challenging times in which we live, and the issues that the community and voluntary sectors have raised in relation to the retention of skilled staff — not to mention service delivery. There is widespread

recognition that all businesses, services and agencies are facing increased overhead costs because of rising fuel and energy costs. No doubt the Minister will examine that issue.

Mrs O'Neill correctly highlighted the difficulties with delayed discharges at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. That is not just a problem for residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital but one for patients in other psychiatric hospitals who have been there for far too long. Rather than it being down to a lack of funding for the Supporting People initiative, those delayed discharges occur because not enough staff are employed in the health and social services sector. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that there was a shortfall of 400 mental-health nurses. Mental-health nurses are vital professionals when it comes to the process of discharging patients and former clients into the community. Therefore, interdepartmental work is required, and I have every confidence that Minister Ritchie will deliver.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I commend Anna Lo and Kieran McCarthy for tabling it. I also thank Anna Lo for giving me a briefing paper published in April 2008 from the Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Service Providers (CRISPP) and CHNI (Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland), which is titled, 'A joint response by CRISSP and CHNI on the impact of the 'Programme for Government' on the Supporting People budget for financial years 2008-2011'.

Although Mr Maginness said that there is no need to be concerned, the briefing paper is worth examining. It states that the Supporting People budget has been baselined at £61 million for 2008-2011 as a result of the Programme for Government. Mr Maginness referred to that figure, but the paper goes on to state that that represents a net cut in funding. It also states that there are serious concerns about the destabilising effect that that is likely to have on the sector.

I am not saying that Members should accept such papers without casting a critical eye over them, but those comments come directly from the sector and are important should people not be convinced that a problem exists.

Mr A Maginness: First, the Member has not taken into consideration that there are no efficiency savings in the scheme, which represent 3%. Secondly, as Mrs Dolores Kelly said, there was underspend in the programme. Thirdly, if there are problems in future, in-year monitoring can always be performed.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mrs McGill: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. I accept his point about

the 3% efficiency savings — I had it in my notes to comment on.

In response to a question for written answer, the Minister said that she had not touched the fund or made efficiency savings, which, I was going to say, is welcome. I note that Mr Maginness did not say that he would look at the briefing paper, so I recommend again that he does — I can give it to him on the way out of the Chamber.

Michelle O'Neill gave an example from her constituency, so I will refer to two groups in my constituency to which I spoke today — the Strabane Association for the Temporary Homeless (SATH) and the Open Doors Housing Association in Dillon Court, also in Strabane. Those two groups gave us definite examples of where they would struggle. Although those groups do great work, are content and appreciate the funding that they receive, they feel that the rising costs will affect them. The Open Doors Housing Association has flats for a range of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, those with mental-health issues, the homeless and single parents. SATH deals with many crisis situations and is concerned about its funding.

SATH provides a floating support service. It must travel and, therefore, pay increased fuel costs, and so on. For example, a child whose parent is a service user had to visit a hospital that was not in the locality; SATH funded the hospital visit for the child's appointment. The organisation is concerned that such services will be lost.

I commend those two facilities in my area, and I have spoken to people who are involved with them. Contrary to some of the contributions that have been made, there is concern that because there is no inflationary increase in funding, that will, as the briefing paper states, amount to a cut.

I do not wish to pick on Mr Maginness; it is just that he mentioned a recommendation to which I have also referred in my notes. The briefing paper also makes two or three recommendations. It suggests that the Minister could apply for funding through the in-year monitoring round. My party welcomes that. One of the paper's other recommendations is that in the immediate term, members would benefit from departmental approval of an inflationary uplift for 2008-2011 that is no less than the retail price index.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to take part in it and to respond to the motion. I am aware that Anna Lo has been concerned about the matter, and I hope that I can provide her with some reassurance. The debate gives me the opportunity to clarify some of the issues that have been raised. Of course, I will try to deal with all Members'

concerns. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will read the Hansard report, and if I have left any question unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

Perhaps I should provide Members with some background information on the Supporting People fund that may help to put the debate in context. It is a policy and funding framework that provides support to enable people to live as independently as possible in their own homes. That can be done through the provision of temporary shelter — for example, for women who have fled domestic violence — or through somewhere for vulnerable adults to develop the skills that are necessary for them to live independently in their own communities.

During the past year, I visited many of those facilities throughout the North of Ireland to talk to young people who have gained skills and expertise that hitherto they would not have been able to gain. They have been able to live in a stabilising environment that has provided them with a great degree of security of tenure. I strongly support those programmes.

The Supporting People programme was introduced in 2003. As many Members said, the fund targets and supports the most vulnerable. We must never lose sight of that. The programme is designed to give more choice in how and where those vulnerable people live, which has opened up more opportunities than previously possible. The number of people who are supported has almost doubled since the programme's introduction in 2003. At the outset, its target was to support 12,000 people into independent living; at present, more than 23,000 people benefit from that support. Therefore, it has been hugely successful.

I am determined to continue to reach out and support even more people who may need it. At present, 120 providers deliver services to 23,000 people in more than 800 schemes throughout Northern Ireland. Providers, such as Mencap, Women's Aid, Homefirst, Age Concern, and the wider housing association movement deliver support service to the most vulnerable in the community.

All providers deserve our deepest respect and gratitude for working tirelessly towards making a significant difference to the lives of all those people.

4.15 pm

Let us get down to the money. In 2003, the allocation for Supporting People was £40 million. That figure jumped to £48 million the next year, then to £52 million, then to £55 million, then to £58 million. The current allocation is £183 million over the next three years. The budget stands at £61 million for this year, and that underlines the growing success of, and increasing support for, the programme, and my commitment to it. Given that increase, I am a little surprised to hear

concerns that funding for the programme is insufficient — or worse, that it is under threat. That is not the case; the facts speak for themselves.

In the last year of direct rule, only £58 million was made available for the fund. Members will recognise that I have increased — not reduced — the resources available for Supporting People, at a time when my Department is under pressure, year on year, to find efficiency savings of 3% right across the board. I remind Members that the Executive made that decision. The Executive are made up of the parties represented in the House; some members of those parties spoke today, and they were the very people who promoted those 3% efficiency savings, against the wishes of others in the Executive. Some in this Chamber have a short memory; I do not.

That further underlines how determined I am to support the most vulnerable in society through the Supporting People fund. I might add that I take that approach right across DSD, squeezing out savings in bureaucracy and administration to free up resources to enhance services to people. Millions of pounds of neighbourhood renewal funding have been refocused towards services, and the same will be done in relation to housing and tackling fuel poverty.

When I launched the new housing agenda earlier this year, I made it clear that I wanted to increase the supply of housing, including the supply of supported and sheltered housing. I assure Members that, in addressing the housing need, I will continue to give priority to those who are most vulnerable.

I further reassure Members that I am by no means drawing a line under that funding, as Mr Maginness and Mrs Kelly indicated. If the case for more funding is made, then more must be done, and that can be delivered. I will avail myself of the opportunities that arise to bid for more resources. I will work closely with service providers to continue to deliver high-quality, cost-effective and reliable housing-related support services. My Department already works with the Housing Executive, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the four area health and social services boards, the Probation Board, and not least of all, the service providers to help inform its future work, and I assure the House that it will continue to do that.

I shall deal with some of the issues raised by Members. Anna Lo referred to an inflationary increase. I will continue to seek additional funds to deliver that very important service. Michelle McIlveen raised the issue of the number of people working in the Supporting People programme. I recognise the important work undertaken by all those people who provide Supporting People's service. Indeed, some 4,500 people provide that valuable service — an increase on three to four

years ago, when approximately 2,500 people were employed.

Let us move on. Fra McCann is continuously in a state of confusion. He is having difficulty with his sums and somebody should tell him what is new. As Minister, I have protected the fund by ensuring that cuts were not applied to the budget.

When I took responsibility for the budget, it was at £58 million.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: No, I will not take any interventions.

I ensured that the budget was increased to £61 million. In October 2007, when Sinn Féin said that I should stop whingeing and accept my lot, I fought a hard, but successful, battle with DFP to ensure that the funding for subsequent years would not be affected. I wish that Fra McCann would listen, rather than repeat the same old, tired message. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must speak through the Chair. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister for Social Development: On Friday, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is due to meet representatives from the Welcome Centre to consider its ongoing funding requirements.

Fra McCann's colleague Claire McGill mentioned two groups in Strabane. If she could possibly provide me with the details of those groups, I will ensure that the issues involved are investigated.

I agree with Alban Maginness that there is no efficiency cut. By taking action to ensure that no such cuts were applied, I ensured that £6 million will be available to direct to Supporting People over the next three-year period.

Jonathan Craig raised several issues, and I assure him that any underspend will be carried forward to future years to meet recurring commitments. I bid for additional funding to implement elements of the Bamford Review, but DFP did not approve it. I wonder who the Minister of that Department is. Perhaps Mr Craig should direct his funding queries to DFP, and I also advise him to put any queries on planning and housing programmes to the Minister of the Environment.

Michelle O'Neill talked about Muckamore Abbey Hospital, and my Department will develop 38 new units, at a cost of £4.6 million, for the resettlement of that hospital's patients.

I emphasise my continuing commitment to the Supporting People programme, and I underline my assurance to Members that I will continue to bid for additional funds during the in-year monitoring rounds, if and when they are required.

Mr McCarthy: I am not sure that I need 10 minutes for my winding-up speech.

Supporting People has made a welcome contribution to the provision of warm and comfortable homes for the most vulnerable people. The initiative was introduced to give people who are less fortunate than us the option to live independently. The programme has performed an excellent function since its foundation in 2003.

However, it appears that threats to its progress now exist. All Members who spoke raised the genuine concern that, from now until 2011, no inflationary increase will be applied to the funding of the programme.

My colleague Anna Lo, and most of the other Members who spoke, talked about the fears that result from the static funding arrangements.

Michelle McIlveen spoke out — rightly — for the needs of young people. Supporting People has been an essential element in giving young folk a decent life. There must be no question of handing back any unspent money. A genuine need exists, and it is essential that the Department seeks out that need and uses all the available resources to meet it.

Mr F McCann: Most of the groups under the Supporting People programme briefed Members of various parties. All say that due to the lack of an inflationary increase, some of the services and jobs that they provide will be affected. Those who listened to the Minister today may agree that the confusion lies not with me or those groups, but with her and the Department.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for drawing that to the Assembly's attention. I will move on and perhaps return to what he said in my closing remarks.

Mr McCann spoke passionately about his worries about any shortfall in funding for Supporting People. He talked about the good work that is carried out by local organisations such as the Simon Community. The Minister must listen to those concerns, and I think that she probably is.

Billy Armstrong outlined that the programme helps more than 23,000 people, and the Minister referred to that. Those people must not be abandoned. Furthermore, Mr Armstrong spoke of Minister McGimpsey's effort in that regard. I thank all Members who attended today's rally at Stormont to support people with learning disabilities.

I am glad that Alban Maginness has confidence in the future. Members would be disappointed if he did not support all the Minister's work. All Members would do the same.

Mr A Maginness: It is the "supporting Minister" programme.

Mr McCarthy: He explained that some concerns are misplaced or premature, and it is good news that the Minister is committed.

Jonathan Craig is worried — as all Members are — about the future of housing for vulnerable people. He presented a strong case for the Planning Service to work with the housing associations. That notion is worth considering. The Planning Service moved slowly, and, therefore, the building of the homes was not completed on time. That could have — and may have — resulted in money not being used where it should have been. Moreover, Jonathan expressed concern about the provision of housing for people with learning difficulties.

Michelle O'Neill outlined that the Supporting People fund was not working in Muckamore Abbey. It is a pity that housing need is not being met in that facility. Further provision for victims of domestic violence would be useful, and the Minister responded —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. However, I remind him of the Minister's concluding remarks in which she outlined that an additional 38 units will be commissioned and built to facilitate the discharge of patients from Muckamore. Does the Member agree that, to a large extent, the progress of those discharges is the responsibility of the Health Service?

Mr McCarthy: I agree.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Hurry up.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to the Minister's statement, and I commend her work on efficiency savings. Although I accept that there have been no cutbacks, there has been no additional money — that is why we face those issues daily.

The situation at Muckamore is not solely a health issue. There is a lack of houses and supported accommodation for people leaving Muckamore. The issue must not be clouded.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for her intervention. I accept the point, and I will comment on that later if I have enough time.

I agree with Dolores Kelly's assertion that the Minister listens to people's concerns. However, the Minister must prove that that is true more often. *[Laughter.]*

She will be judged on whether or not she delivers a good continuous service to our most vulnerable people. Dolores mentioned that skilled staff will be required to deliver a well-administered service to the public. That matter is of concern to all Members.

I wrote in my notes that it was good to see agreement between Alban Maginness and Claire McGill. *[Laughter.]*

I had written that before the disagreement between Alban and Claire.

Claire mentioned the future of two groups from Strabane. All Members are concerned about that matter, and it gives the Minister good reason to convince the House that our people are not threatened.

During her speech, the Minister blew her own trumpet — and why not. We welcome the fact that the Minister is visiting communities. In fact, she will, I hope, visit my constituency next week. It is important that other Ministers do likewise.

I am pleased about that. The Minister pointed out that, at the start of the programme, 12,000 people were seeking independent living: that figure has now risen to 23,000. That is good, that is progress.

4.30 pm

I come to the crux of the matter: the Minister gave us her Department's annual budget figures from 2002 to 2008. Since 2003, her budget has increased annually by £3 million, and, by 2008, it had reached £61 million. I am worried that, next year, the year after and the year after that, the budget will remain fixed at £61 million. That means that, over those three years, her budget will lose out on nine million quid that could be used to provide more housing or services to the most vulnerable people.

I was interested in the Minister's assertion that she had asked for more money but that the Minister of Finance and Personnel had refused. I do not know who the Finance Minister was at that time. However, I call on Michelle McIlveen and Jonathan Craig to use whatever influence they may have on the DUP Minister to get him to cough up when it is necessary.

All Members agree that the Supporting People fund has been very useful. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the current budget for the Supporting People fund to include inflationary increases, so that the programme's existing sustainability and quality of service is not put at risk.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Financial Advice for Older People

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Cobain: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the increasing number of pensioners who are experiencing debt and financial difficulties; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a strategy for improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people.

An alarming number of pensioners are experiencing debt and financial difficulties in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom. The cost of living is escalating at a much higher rate for senior citizens than for the rest of the population. Rising inflation and commodity prices can be much more damaging to a pensioner whose income has dropped to a limited, fixed rate. In stark contrast to the rapid rise in the prices of food and energy — the two items on which pensioners are most likely to spend their money — state pensions have increased by only £3.40 since last year: that is, from £87.30 to £90.70 per week.

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

An additional 5,000 pensioners have been forced into poverty in Northern Ireland in the last 12 months. Twenty-eight per cent of pensioners must survive below the poverty line, and one older person in seven lives in severe poverty in Northern Ireland. Those figures alone make a mockery of the Executive's target of eradicating poverty.

Changes in financial services and markets over the last decade have also greatly affected pensioners and those reaching retirement age. Many people's private pensions have been substantially reduced due to the volatility of the stock market.

Historically, older people have avoided, or have had more limited levels of, debt. As people reach retirement age, they are often approaching the end of their mortgage and loan repayments. However, reports to older people's organisations suggest that the problem of debt, far from diminishing, is escalating. It becomes evident that more and more older people enter retirement age with debts outstanding or are forced to supplement their incomes with credit-card expenditure or loans.

At present, 33% of individuals over 60 years of age in Northern Ireland have at least one credit card. One in six retirees in the United Kingdom still has a mortgage to pay. One in three of those who have a mortgage owes more than £50,000, and one in 10 owes over £100,000. Help the Aged points out that, in 2005, credit users in

their late 50s and early 60s owed, on average, four times as much their counterparts did in 1995. Many people agree that there is the potential for a debt crisis in the coming decade.

Research has highlighted that the first year of retirement is often crucial, as retirees find it extremely difficult to adjust to a limited income and a more limited lifestyle. With more than half of those aged between 55 and 65 still paying a mortgage, it is vital that they are prepared to meet their financial commitments with a reduced income. Once those people are forced into debt, they find it extremely difficult to remove themselves from it due to their fixed income. It is extremely important that interventions are made to help individuals already in debt, and — more importantly — to prevent others from getting into debt.

The increase in utility bills has forced many older people into debt and has added to their existing debt. The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland estimated that oil customers are paying £346 more this year than they did last year. Although prices are finally coming down, the effect of the increase has put many additional pensioners into debt. Furthermore, Northern Ireland Electricity confirmed that household electricity bills have increased by a staggering 33% since 1 October 2008, and Phoenix Natural Gas increased its prices by almost 20%, which is 113% higher than this time last year.

As research by the Equality Commission highlighted, many older people live alone, have limited support and have a more limited understanding of modern financial services, methods of managing money and paying for goods. Chip and PIN, Internet banking and direct-debit payments are often an enigma to many pensioners. That means that many older people cannot avail of the cheaper online deals or cheaper direct-debit payments.

Many older people use cash only, do not have a bank account and cannot access the Internet. In addition, the post office closures mean that pensioners' choices in that area are limited. Utility providers often offer cheaper prices for people who pay by direct debit. Therefore, they often make greater profits from those people who are the least able to pay. A greater understanding of the modern financial mechanisms for payment and moving money are a must for all members of society, but especially for the elderly. Any financial-education plans must meet the needs of older people.

The voluntary sector that provides advice for older people in Northern Ireland has recorded an increasing number of people who request debt advice. Age Concern has experienced an increase in its debt caseload — the organisation currently deals with more than £700,000 of debt, despite being a service that has never been advertised formally. Its debt load has increased by

more than 50% from this time last year and by more than £120,000 from May last year.

It is crucial that the Department for Social Development and the voluntary and community sector deliver greater levels of advice to older people. It is also crucial that that advice is accessible and simple. The Equality Commission's research shows that many older people do not like using complicated phone services. They trust local services and personal contacts, and do not like to ask for help. It is therefore crucial that the advice is accessible and appropriate.

I recognise that the Minister has instigated a strategy for supporting the delivery of voluntary advice services to the community through the Opening Doors programme. There is little doubt that the voluntary and community sector is often best-placed to identify and work with those who need help. However, it is considered that there is a lack of in-depth research regarding debt among older people in Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister to clarify what information about debt levels and advice to older people is being used in that process. Will initiatives be implemented that will singly address the problem of debt for older people?

There is another way in which improved financial advice could improve the financial situations of older people in Northern Ireland. Each year, at least £50 million in pension credit goes unclaimed by people aged 60 or over in Northern Ireland. It is crucial that elderly people avail of the benefits to which they are completely entitled, especially in the current and continuing economic downturn.

I recognise the excellent work carried out by many community and voluntary groups. The inter-agency approach that has been implemented by Access to Benefits is especially good. Its trained outreach workers engage with elderly people in a meaningful and productive manner, advising them in their own terms, and it is crucial that such strategies are widened and implemented on a more far-reaching basis.

Although I recognise the fact that the Minister for Social Development has made some progress in that area, more must be done. A significant, well-advertised campaign that includes simple mechanisms to address people's needs in an easy-to-utilise and engaging way must be implemented.

The United Kingdom economy is now in recession, and, although the banking system has increased liquidity due to taxpayer's assistance, individual loans — whether unsecured credit cards, overdrafts, bank loans or mortgages — must still be paid. At a time of rising inflation and commodity prices, people on fixed incomes — particularly pensioners — are in a much more difficult position.

Elderly people are often less able to engage and participate in the modern financial system. Therefore,

it is crucial that the Minister introduce a strategy for improving the quality of access to financial services for older people. I support the motion.

Mr Craig: I thank the proposer of the motion for securing the debate. If one analyses the financial crisis that everyone is facing, it is not difficult to see that elderly people are suffering disproportionately, which is why the Assembly must consider how to alleviate some of the financial stress on that group.

It is only right that, before going any further, I point out something that is obvious. Despite older people's massive needs, the Chamber's unanimous support for action to be taken to help those people and the fact that many Ministers have made public statements about having the finances and plans to ease the pressures on them, older people in Northern Ireland are being held to ransom by Sinn Féin. That party's refusal to allow the Executive to meet has not helped the situation, and it has not helped pensioners to find their way out of hardship.

Returning to the motion, if one considers the increased pressures on pensioners, one realises that they face some basic concerns, some of which Alban Maginness mentioned. Will pensioners and older people have enough money to heat their homes or to put food on the table this winter? Will the cutbacks that they are being forced to make have an adverse effect on their health? Matters have reached that stage. Furthermore, although oil costs two thirds of what it did a month ago, it costs twice as much to fill an oil tank as it did two years ago. Consequently, elderly people are facing huge problems.

Some surprising statistics were mentioned earlier: one in six retirees in the UK still has a mortgage, and one in ten retirees has a mortgage of more than £100,000, which is absolutely astonishing. The mortgage credit crunch is putting those elderly people under even greater stress. Another factor — as reported by the Consumer Credit Counselling Service in 2007 — is that elderly people have the highest debt-to-income ratio. When one retires, unfortunately, one's debt level remains unchanged but one's income falls drastically.

4.45 pm

However, some of the problems in the sector are not due to a lack of available financial help for elderly people; the problem is getting the message out to those people that help is available. Worse still, a huge percentage of our elderly population believes that all Government handouts are exactly that — handouts. Financial assistance is not a handout; it is something that elderly people have toiled for throughout their working lives and which they deserve.

That is why we need to send the message out loud and clear that financial assistance is available for

elderly people. Help can be obtained through Citizens Advice and other services, and our elderly people need to find the information and assistance that the system can afford them. That is why I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat. I also commend the proposers for tabling the motion. However, I am surprised that Jonathan Craig did not blame Sinn Féin for the credit crunch, because it seems to be responsible for everything else.

It is somewhat ironic that we are dealing with the issue of finances for older people and the problems that those people have with income, when legislation is about to be introduced that will reduce the backdating of pension credit from one year to three months. The rationale from the Department is that older people will find such a system easier to deal with. I am sure that pensioners who are waiting for nine months' extra benefit would be prepared to wait a wee bit longer rather than receiving just three months' benefit within a shorter time frame.

Financial education and debt-management services have usually been targeted at younger people. In general, younger people have higher levels of debt, but they may be better able to handle their debt. By contrast, older people may not be in such a position. As Mr Cobain said, historically, older people have avoided debt. As people become older, they face changes in their circumstances that can impact on their financial situation and their ability to manage money. Initially in retirement, pensioners experience a sudden drop in income, for which they are often unprepared and find difficult to adjust to.

An issue that has caused an increase in the need for debt management among older people is the increased cost of living. According to recent statistics, the cost of a shopping basket of staple goods has risen by almost 29% in one year. Furthermore, there has been a dramatic increase in energy prices, with electricity prices rising by approximately 33% and gas prices by 19% from 1 October, and customers buying oil are now paying approximately £346 more compared with this time last year. Older people are more exposed to inflationary pressures than any other age group because of higher usage and lower income. One in five pensioners in the North is now living in poverty.

Increases to benefits are based on official inflation rates and are, therefore, worth less now than they were a year ago. Older people who had previously avoided credit are being forced into debt to maintain a basic standard of living, and they are more likely to use credit for essentials such as food and heating. The problem of debt in old age is escalating. We must work alongside organisations for older people in order to identify the best means of alleviating the problem. Proper, focused

research into older age and indebtedness must be undertaken, and the scale of the problem must be identified.

Debt and money-management initiatives for older people must be supported and promoted. Financial education — specifically targeting older people — is fundamental in preventing debt. Financial advice for individuals who have already retired is vital, and consideration must be given to the particular needs of that group when attempting to improve financial capability.

Choices are limited for the many older people who use only cash and who cannot access the Internet. There are also literacy and numeracy problems — I believe that the most recent survey in relation to that issue was undertaken in 1996, and people over 65 were not surveyed.

Rising utility costs have created new debt, and we must ensure that incomes increase in line with rising costs. We have one of the meanest pensions in Europe. It is imperative that state pensions be linked to earnings now. Entitlement to such means-tested entitlements as pension credits depends on the individual who makes the claim.

The Minister has talked about benefit uptake and the targeting of 90,000 people, in conjunction with voluntary organisations, but only 687 claims have been processed so far.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that pensioners and senior citizens are turned off by the bulk of the form that they receive in the post? Rather than making an attempt to fill in the form, they leave it aside and choose not to complete it. That is where the system fails, despite the Minister's good efforts.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree that the complexity of forms is a huge problem for older people in particular. It is now possible to make benefit claims by telephone, and that service is being used for pension credits in particular. However, that causes problems for many older people as they attempt to articulate their details and needs.

With respect to fuel poverty, we should work with energy suppliers to explore the setting up of a utility trust, which could provide grants to clear arrears. Such a trust has been considered in other regions of Britain. Many older people are not aware of the social fund, for instance.

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

Mr Brady: The social fund must be promoted widely and advertised among older people. Older people are fed up with rhetoric; they want results. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the motion in so far as it highlights the grave situation that faces many elderly people in our community. Mr Cobain was right to bring this important motion before the House. People, particularly the elderly, are feeling vulnerable as a result of the financial pressures in their lives.

I have a concern that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, might consider. The motion:

“calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a strategy for improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people”.

However, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) holds primary responsibility for debt counselling; it is not the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. That does not take away from Mr Cobain’s good intentions in tabling the motion. However, it is important that the Minister with the primary responsibility for the substance of a motion be in the Chamber when it is debated. That must be looked into. I do not know whether that is the responsibility of the Business Committee or the Executive, but it ought to be considered.

Mr Cobain: Does the Member agree that the Minister for Social Development is responsible for advice-giving services? Advice-giving services provide advice for everyone, including pensioners. This is not an issue for any Department in particular. The Minister has a role, in that her Department provides advice-giving services.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Cobain is absolutely right. The Minister and her Department are responsible for advice-giving services. However, the Department for Social Development does not have the primary responsibility for the specific service of debt advice. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has that responsibility — and it carries out that responsibility. I make the point not to be smart, but to highlight the problems that can arise on the Floor of the House in relation to departmental functions.

The Department for Social Development has taken a vigorous approach to benefit take-up, and part of that approach is an advice-giving service. For people to benefit, they must be advised. Citizens Advice, in conjunction with the Department and as a result of a contract with the Department, carries out that function. An additional £15 million in benefits has been raised through that advice service. That is important and it must be built on. I note that the Minister and the Department, through the Opening Doors strategy, is pursuing the uptake of benefit.

The contract with Citizens Advice has been extended, and that will be of great benefit to our elderly population. Effectively, Citizens Advice offers an MOT to elderly people. They can go along and see, comprehensively, what benefits they can access. It is a

great service, available to the community at large, and there are 289,000 people of pensionable age —

Mr Brady: Will the Member explain how the reduction of pension credit advisers in local offices has contributed to helping older people with their finances and accessing benefit?

Mr A Maginness: I understand that the Department for Social Development has put great emphasis on people accessing pension credit, and there has been an increase in take-up by older people in the community. I do not have the precise figures in front of me, but I am aware that when people reach pensionable age the Department makes strenuous efforts to reach out to them to ensure that they take up their full benefit entitlement to pension credit. That is an important aspect of the Department’s function.

I support the motion, and I give credit to Mr Cobain for raising the issue.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome the motion — it would be hard not to. As the fifth Member to speak in the debate, it is difficult not to repeat all the quotations from ‘Debt and Older People’, the Help the Aged document that other Members have referred to. However, I shall try and speak for five minutes without referring to it.

The motion will draw attention to the gathering storm that surrounds the over-60s and their increasing difficulties with debt and money management. There is no doubt that today’s pensioners — if I can still call them pensioners — are being changed gradually from a generation of reasonably well-prepared, thrifty people able to live largely within their means with the aid of state benefits, to a generation who are now carrying increasing amounts of debt into their retirement years. That has been caused by a gradual combination of events: the ease of obtaining credit; state benefits that do not keep pace with the cost of living; the inability to clear mortgage debt before retirement; endowment returns that fall short of promises and projections; and a natural temptation to draw on the equity of one’s house when things get tough.

5.00 pm

Fuel prices — gas, oil and coal — are now going through the roof. There has been a bit of a fall in prices recently, but I fear that that drop is only temporary. People are taking on debt to pay for the necessities of life, and the figures that Age Concern and Help the Aged are now presenting are extremely worrying.

I will repeat some figures that others quoted earlier. In 2006, the Scottish Widows Bank reported that over 50% of pre-retirees aged 55 to 65 have an average mortgage debt of over £60,000. That fact is astonishing, and the figure is probably even higher now. The bank also reported that around half of all workers lack an

adequate pension, and market conditions are exacerbating that situation, too. Pension funds have been drastically reduced and will take years to recover. All those statistics point to a developing crisis for the older section of our population. That crisis has occurred in part because of economic factors and market conditions, but also because of a lack of quality advice and ignorance of benefit availability, as the motion suggests.

I note that Help the Aged advocates the more active promotion of the social fund, to which Mr Brady referred. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on that. Money-management skills — including the use of modern banking methods and Internet facilities — must be better promoted to the over-60s. It seems incredible that half of entitled older people fail to claim their pension credit and that £160 million goes unclaimed every year. I note that the Help the Aged document 'Debt and Older People' poses the question: do the Government not hold sufficient data on state pensions to identify and pay pension credit to those who are entitled to it? I do not know the answer to that question, but I would like to find out.

I applaud the efforts of Citizens Advice and the many other voluntary bodies to provide the necessary services. However, the Department has a role to play, too, beyond its promotion of the benefits uptake campaign, which I understand has had limited success. More needs to be done. The Alliance Party favours the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group's recommendation that we should copy the example of British Gas in the UK, which has established a utilities trust. There may be other ways to provide relief and help with winter fuel payments on the basis of voluntary action on the part of energy suppliers. Indeed, I made that suggestion recently, and I should like to talk to the Minister about it, if I can get ever get an audience with her.

The thrust of the motion is about the provision of quality financial advice, and that should be the starting point of any initiative. I applaud the proposer of the motion for bringing it before the Assembly, and the Alliance Party will certainly support it.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion; to steal a phrase from the Minister of Education, "we are where we are" in relation to who is responding to the debate today. We welcome the attendance of the Minister for Social Development, and I am sure that she will agree that this debate is timely and important. I agree with Mr Lunn that Members will repeat much of what has been said already in the debate. I must apologise in advance, because I may do just that.

The motion calls on us to note the increasing number of pensioners who are experiencing debt and financial difficulties. My fear is that we are aware of only a small number of the pensioners who are

experiencing difficulties. Many of those about whom we are most concerned are in their 70s and 80s or older. That generation lived through the war years and the subsequent hardships; they are the generation who make do and are often too proud to ask for help.

In my constituency office, I meet so many pensioners who see any form of benefit, such as DLA or Motability allowance, as some kind of charity. Those pensioners do not see benefit uptake as a right; rather, they see benefits as something to be avoided. They feel that they should be given to others who they perceive as being in greater need than they are. Even when they are told that they are entitled to such benefits, they simply are not interested in availing themselves of them.

Although I see much merit in the motion, it assumes that all older people will look for financial advice, and we should not forget those who do not want to be — in their opinion — a burden on society. However, I am also aware that a section of pensioners are very vocal about their belief that there is not enough financial provision for the elderly. In my role as a public representative, some of the issues about which I am often asked, other than education issues, involve pensioner care.

Issues that pensioners have mentioned to me include: more payments for pensioners; the tackling of pensioner poverty; pensioner heating; pensioner welfare; pensioner loneliness; pensioner activities; free care for the elderly; enhanced subsidies for nursing-home care; water meters for pensioners; better pensions; and more concessions for the elderly. The common theme of their concerns is a fear that they will be unable to manage their meagre resources adequately to make ends meet.

The Equality Commission's report, 'Older People's Access to Financial Services', contains several sensible suggestions on how to improve the situation. The report by Help the Aged, 'Debt and Older People: How Age Affects Attitudes to Borrowing', provides some stark statistics. Those reports recognise that elderly people face a number of hurdles in accessing financial services. Such hurdles include direct and indirect discrimination; the fact that many older people do not have bank accounts or credit cards; reluctance to ask for help; unfamiliarity with modern forms of managing money; lack of access to cheaper Internet deals; and poor literacy levels.

As Mr Cobain and other Members stated, many older people do not have bank accounts, let alone the ability to use online banking. They cannot use direct-debit payments if they do not have bank accounts, and many utilities offer better deals to customers who use pay by direct debit. Elderly people are not generally regarded as representing a good borrowing or credit market. Therefore, they often rely on more expensive,

less regulated sources. Furthermore, there has been a rise in the phenomenon of equity release, which is shamelessly marketed and can lead to huge problems regarding tax and benefits. Therefore, elderly people can end up badly off.

Older people need access to properly independent and non-discriminatory information and to be made aware of their entitlements. I appreciate that the benefit uptake programme and pension advisers carry out a great deal of work in that regard. However, more work is required to educate the elderly in proper money management. The reports that I mentioned were drafted before the current financial turmoil, so the hardships that they identify are now even worse. Indeed, pensioners will find it even harder to obtain credit and will be even more reluctant to entrust their money to banks.

I support the motion as it may provide tangible benefits and genuine assistance for older people.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the Minister's presence at the debate. There is an opportunity for the Assembly to unite on the matter. I look forward to the Minister's response — especially regarding the financial advice aspect — and to the House's agreement on the motion.

We are living in a climate of great financial pressure on Governments, business and industry. Every day, we read headlines about summit meetings and commitments of trillions of pounds to establish emergency budgets to bail out the banking and financial sector. Indeed, in many instances, it is the culprits who are being bailed out of the financial crisis. It is in the context of those media headlines that we must consider the pressures, anxieties and uncertainties being experienced by the older members of our society, such as incomes that are falling in real terms because of the increasing costs of food, heating and accommodation.

The motion seeks to identify an appropriate response to the myriad financial challenges that are confronting older people and to give them advice that will make a practical difference to the pressures that are affecting them.

Older people face problems in accessing financial services, and Miss McIlveen — who is not in her place now — adequately identified those problems. I do not wish to patronise any older members of our society. However, there is a capacity problem and older people's experience of managing finance is different from that of younger members of the modern society. That creates pressures and difficulties, particularly for people who, culturally, are not inclined to seek assistance or who may not even know where to go for such help.

In that context, everyone can acknowledge from their own experience the issues that arise from the

sheer complexity of engaging with modern financial institutions. All of that has been exacerbated because older people will describe their positive experience of local post office counter staff — people whom they knew personally and who understood the older person's concerns and difficulties. The continued closures simply add to the mounting difficulties. Health problems that come with advancing age also make existing problems more difficult to manage.

The Assembly is keen, indeed anxious, to recognise and to address those issues. I will use my remaining time to address repeated references to the current difficulties that prevent the Executive from meeting. The main obstacle from a Sinn Féin perspective — other parties will have their own — is the perverse insistence by the DUP that its mandate entitles it to a veto over the mandates or the priorities of other partners in the power-sharing Executive. The DUP argues that that arrangement is mandatory. The only thing that was mandatory was the requirement to achieve a necessary mandate. After that, a party could choose whether or not to be in the Executive. It is not mandatory that the DUP takes its place in the Executive — it volunteered to be there. Therefore, opportunities should be sought to share responsibility among equal partners in the Executive.

I hope that the DUP comes to accept that it created the conditions for the impasse by putting obstacles in the way of other parties achieving their priorities. The solution should be equally obvious: deal with their partners in the Executive on the basis of equality and parity of esteem. That is the solution that will open up a way for the Executive to function. However, in the meantime, Ministers are seen to be introducing initiatives within their budgets and the Programme for Government. I strongly welcome that and, in particular, I welcome the debate and the opportunity for the Minister for Social Development, who is in the Chamber, to demonstrate how she will respond to the need that has been identified. I support the motion on behalf of Sinn Féin.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, I am shocked by some of the statistics that have been quoted on the plight faced by older people this winter. Everything possible must be done to lessen their burden.

Thair ir differ things at ir thaire tae heft thae aulder fowk wha wul hae hannlins owre the wunther — tae naime a when thair's lone-pensioner allowance, wairm hame scheme, wunther fuel allowance — an it cannae bae dooted at thae things ir a bag heft. Hooiniver, the hannlin bes at in maist cases it be sap tae the boadie tae leuk fer thae things an' maist auld fowk dinnae know what they ir entitlet tae an sae cannae leuk fer hit.

The help available for older people who will struggle this winter includes the lone-pensioner allowance, the warm homes scheme and the winter fuel allowance. However, the problem is that in most cases it is up to the individual to apply for that help, and since most older people are unaware of what they are entitled to they do not apply.

I will give a supreme example of a case in which the system failed. Some time ago my colleague Gregory Campbell made me aware of some ladies who may have been entitled to extra pension payments that they had not claimed. In a country where people often complain about being taxed, sometimes to the brink of survival, the DUP is a low-tax party. That is why, once I was aware of the case, I brought it to the attention of the public in my constituency. There was a possibility of getting some money repaid at a time when many people would welcome that extra boost.

Gregory Campbell supplied me with the fact that usually a person must work for 39 years to have sufficient National Insurance contributions to qualify for a full state pension.

5.15 pm

Over the years, thousands of ladies have given up work to raise their families. On 6 April 1978, the Government introduced the home responsibilities protection scheme, which meant that for every year that a woman claimed child benefit for a child under 16 — and was not working or being credited with National Insurance contributions — a year would be reduced from the 39 years required to qualify for a full state pension. In real terms, if a woman took 15 years off work to stay at home with her child, she would only have to work a further 24 years before she would be entitled to her full state pension. However, there was a problem: a change in departmental records meant that many women have not been recorded as qualifying for the home responsibilities protection scheme to which they were entitled. It could mean a pension increase of £2 per week for a maximum of 19 years, which is quite significant. Therefore, if a woman took 15 years off work, she could be £30 per week worse off unless her claim was made and accepted.

One does not have to be a mathematician to work out that £30 a week amounts to £1,560 a year. That could pay for a tank of oil or it could help towards buying groceries. That illustrates how the money could help people, and it could mean the difference between a healthy winter and a fraught one. My colleague informed me about that scheme, not the Department that has responsibility for it.

Many pensioners could be entitled to more money than they receive, but if my colleague had not made me aware of that scheme, I would know nothing about

it. Surely, the relevant Department needs to highlight the existence of such schemes and benefits.

The Equality Commission stated that there should be legislative protection for older people. I agree, but I will go further and say that advisers should be available in every constituency to help older people with their day-to-day finances. The Department employs pension advisers who do a grand job, and we work with them regularly.

A nice elderly gentleman comes into my constituency office at least once a month with his mail. His wife handled all his correspondence, but she has passed on, and he simply does not understand any of the communications that he receives. The girls in the office sort through his insurance and pension papers and try to help him. How many other people are in the same boat and need similar assistance?

I know that the Minister is a lady of conviction and a compassionate woman. With that in mind, I ask her to make changes in her Department that will make people's lives just that wee bit better and to ensure that, as the hard winter looms, the Minister will provide help to older people when they need it. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: On that lovely note, I call the Minister for Social Development, Ms Margaret Ritchie. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Alban Maginness has just said that I should await my bouquet of flowers.

I welcome the opportunity to inform the Assembly of my Department's involvement in providing financial advice for older people. However, I must deal with a process point first, and I hope that the relevant Members are listening. My Department has responsibility for general advice, and it also provides benefits services to older people. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has the policy lead on older people and poverty; however, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for advice relating to debt. DETI has commissioned Citizens Advice specifically to dispense debt-related advice, and the Department is in the process of introducing a debt relief Bill. In fact, at the request of my colleague, the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I briefed the Committee last week on that piece of legislation. Therefore, I think that DETI should have taken the lead on the motion, and that point has already been acknowledged by my colleague Alban Maginness.

The motion refers to me, but that is not sufficient to make it mine only. For example, if a Member were to propose a motion asking me to comment on the new Narrow Water bridge project, I would be happy to do so, as it is a wonderful project and it should be

prioritised. However, it would be wrong for me to do so, because it would be a motion for the Minister for Regional Development, and he should respond to it. Anyhow, that is enough on that point about process.

I am content to talk about the work that Department for Social Development (DSD) is doing to give advice and assistance to older people. The past year has brought great global change, and today, as all Members who contributed to the debate acknowledged, we face a difficult financial climate. Rising energy and food costs and the well-documented credit crunch have had an enormous knock-on effect on everyone. We all know that, as always, it will be the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in society who will be the worst affected. The protection of those vulnerable groups is also the mainstream business of DSD, and the current economic climate points up the seriousness and importance of that work.

My Department has carried out proactive work through the Social Security Agency and through the launch and implementation of a strategy for voluntary advice services. Both will have a direct impact on older people, their financial circumstances and their access to financial advice. DSD is leading on many actions to improve circumstances for older people. The Social Security Agency commenced an advertising campaign recently to increase awareness of the winter-fuel payment — which is available to people who are over 60 years of age — for newly eligible customers. The first series of advertisements was published in the daily press in August, with further press coverage planned for November.

The increasing cost of fuel has meant that some older people will, undoubtedly, have difficulty budgeting this year. I want to make sure that people can afford to heat their homes this winter. I acknowledged the crisis earlier on; I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force, and on receipt of its proposals, I brought a paper to the Executive. However, sadly, three meetings of the Executive have lapsed and have not taken place. I ask those parties who are blockading the Executive to stop doing so in order to ensure that a full-blown debate can take place and that decisions can be made on the multifaceted approach to fuel poverty that is required. If we are to help people in January, that work must begin now.

I will not take lectures from anyone on that matter, because it has been raised in the Chamber today already. I have done my part; it is up to other Ministers to step up to the plate. They must stop blockading the Executive and get on with business: that is what the people of Northern Ireland expect us to do.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I will not take any interventions.

I will now move on to the issue of benefit uptake, which is one of the Social Security Agency's key priorities. Experience has taught us that sometimes we must reach out to the public in order to ensure that they receive all that they are entitled to. Since 2005, a targeted approach has been adopted to increasing benefit uptake. The Social Security Agency has been working with Citizens Advice to offer vulnerable clients a comprehensive assessment of all benefit entitlement. That has generated an additional £15 million of benefits going into the pockets of those who are most in need. Members will agree that that is no small sum.

Building on that success, I launched the benefit uptake programme in May 2008. That will target some of the most vulnerable groups in society: older people; people with a disability; and families. A total of 115,000 people across Northern Ireland will be contacted directly in order to ensure that they are not missing out on benefits. Less than six months into the programme and in conjunction with Citizens Advice, more than 90,000 people have been written to, and I wrote to some of those people myself. Pension credit, at an average of more than £46 a week, has been paid to those who have submitted applications already and had them approved. That amounts to more than £1.5 million a year in extra benefit. It is worth making the point that that money has been paid directly to those who need it.

Lest anyone in the House forgets, each one of us has a duty and a responsibility to help people. That is what we are elected to do. We have a responsibility to give advice, and we must ensure that older people in the community fill out their forms and have their benefit entitlement assessed and paid where appropriate. Do not let us shirk our responsibilities. Too often, we want to pass the blame on to other people — let us not do that.

Mr Brady made reference to social security regulations. He will be well aware of the need to comply with parity legislation, but his party colleagues gave the ability to amend that legislation — if only they were to take their seats at Westminster, they would be able to fulfil their full responsibilities in respect of this matter. Do not give me lectures about these matters.

I will continue to push forward all practical steps, because I believe that they will make a real difference to people's lives at a very difficult time. I have been proactive in my approach to voluntary advice services. Last year, my Department made a significant contribution of almost £2 million to front-line advice provision, and over £1.5 million to regional advice offices. I also launched the Opening Doors advice strategy last year — which Mr Cobain acknowledged — the purpose of which is to ensure that good-quality generalist advice is available to all people in Northern Ireland, particularly vulnerable groups such as older

people and those in most need. I am sure that Mr Cobain is already aware that officials from my Department work closely with Help the Aged and Age Concern in order to ensure that those people who need advice get it in the most timely manner possible. I want to ensure that that continues.

In fact, Northern Ireland is the only area in these islands that has developed a strategy for voluntary advice services, and, as a result, I have secured an additional £1 million per year, ring-fenced specifically for local advice services. To ensure that it is fully inclusive and that particular needs groups, such as older people, are not overlooked, a specialist advisory panel has been formed, which represents the interests of the specialist organisations; Help the Aged, Age Concern and A2B are represented on that panel. That will ensure that all client groups, including older people, are able to access the best independent advice services throughout Northern Ireland.

I consider good-quality advice in the voluntary sector to be extremely important, as it makes a huge difference to people's lives. As an MLA I receive a lot of feedback in my constituency office and am well aware of the hardships faced by many older people, and other people in need. My purpose in this ministry is to ensure that money and resources are focused on those in need. The most important thing that we can all do is to ensure that those in need get the help they require.

In summary, my Department is taking a number of important steps to ensure that the most vulnerable in society are protected, today and in the future. I am serious about my commitment to meet the needs of older people. A great deal of work is under way on the benefit-uptake programme and the Opening Doors advice strategy to support local voluntary advice provision. I will continue to work with other government Departments, local government and the voluntary sector to realise the vision of a comprehensive, accessible advice service for all those in need throughout Northern Ireland. I want to provide reassurance to all Members of the House that my work and that of my officials will continue. If there are any particular issues that I have not addressed, I am happy to look at the Hansard report and provide answers to Members.

Mr McCallister: I thank Members and the Minister for their participation in this important debate.

Mr Cobain opened the debate by detailing the reasons behind it, and throughout the debate many Members have reinforced those reasons with statistics and other information from their own constituencies. Of course, the reasons are rising food and fuel prices, reduced income, and the fact that people are now retiring with much higher levels of debt than ever before.

As Mr Cobain pointed out, we are heading towards a debt crisis over the next decade as people retire with greater debt, with mortgages still hanging over them and with a reduced income.

5.30 pm

Several Members, including Mr Cobain, mentioned the closure of post offices. That issue is most keenly felt in rural constituencies, one of which I represent. Mr Cobain also said that the quality of access to financial services for older people must be improved.

Mr Craig blamed Sinn Féin for not allowing the Executive to meet, and the Minister for Social Development also touched on that. Mr Craig mentioned how much the cost of oil has risen in just over a year, and that the debt-to-income ratio of pensioner families is higher than that of other groups.

Listening to Mr Brady, I was not sure whether he wanted Sinn Féin to be blamed for the credit crunch; if he does, I am happy to agree. He mentioned financial education and debt-management advice. That is predominantly aimed at young people and it should be maintained, but it must be focused more heavily on older people and pensioner families. He said that the price of food has risen by 29% in a year, but that we have the meanest pension in Europe.

Mr Alban Maginness welcomed the motion, but he questioned whether it should have been directed to the Minister for Social Development. The motion calls for a strategy for:

"improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people."

The debate has been much broader than simply focusing on debt advice, and I note that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has entered the Chamber. Mr Maginness accepted that additional benefits have resulted from the good work done by Citizens Advice.

Mr Lunn said that he was anxious not to repeat everyone, but he then did exactly that. *[Laughter.]* He spoke of debt, money management, lower and below-expectation endowment returns, average mortgage debt of £60,000, and the fact that half of all workers do not have an adequate pension. The problem will not go away; it will become more serious as more people retire with inadequate provision.

Miss McIlveen and other Members feared that we are only aware of a small number of pensioners who are in severe difficulty. Pensioners are a particularly hard-to-reach group, who, for many years, have prided themselves on making do with limited resources and generally knuckling down and getting on with life. That group is owed much better service and advice. Miss McIlveen mentioned some of the issues that affect her constituency; they also affect my constituency and Mr Cobain's. They include poverty,

loneliness, free personal care and water, the last of which is definitely a debate for another Minister. Those issues affect all constituencies, and hardship is now worse than before.

Mr McLaughlin accepted that older people face great hardship, and he reiterated the benefits of local post offices in providing help, advice and guidance.

He went on to mention health problems of the elderly. I am acutely aware, through even my involvement with the Health Committee, that health is closely linked to a person's financial situation. Issues such as social inclusion have a huge impact on the older population.

Mr McLaughlin then veered off into why the Executive were not meeting, and sort of begged us not to attack Sinn Féin over that. However, someone has to get a grip on the issues. People expect leadership from the Assembly, and at the minute we are not getting that from the Executive branch of Government.

Mr Shannon spoke about the winter fuel payment, the warm homes scheme and the lone pensioner allowance. I noted those items down even when he was speaking in Ulster Scots — *[Interruption.]*

I have just been told that I am bi-lingual.

Mr Shannon gave good examples, and I believe it was pointed out that he failed to declare an interest. *[Laughter.]* However, he is justified in asking why the Department is not campaigning more actively in getting advice to older people.

The Minister, who may still be awaiting the arrival of the flowers, may have to wait for some time yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: And champagne —

Mr McCallister: There will definitely be no champagne. The Minister drew attention to the fact that debt management was an issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. If the Department for Social Development was so concerned about that, it could have spoken to the Business Office when the motion was being drafted initially and sorted it out. The motion is much broader than debt management: it is about financial advice for senior citizens.

I was not sure how we got from that point to the Narrow Water bridge. *[Laughter.]* Debt relief for pensioners would be a much better investment than the Narrow Water bridge. As regards who is responsible for the complexity of form-filling, I was not sure which was more complex — the Minister's initial remarks about Narrow Water bridge or the form itself.

There are issues with the Social Security Agency's advertising of the winter fuel allowance and the difficulties that pensioners face with fuel bills. The Minister spoke about the Executive not meeting, and

there is an increasing public demand that something be done. If it is coming straight from a Government Minister that the Executive not meeting is blocking business and delivery of services to people, the public will want to see action. The matter is rapidly turning not just the Executive branch of Government, but also the legislative branch, into a laughing stock.

Valuable work is being carried out on benefits uptake, with targeted approaches to people; working closely with citizens advice bureaux; drawing down an extra £15 million for those who are most in need, and with 90,000 people having been contacted.

I agree with the Minister that there is a responsibility not only on us all to ensure that the work is done by the Department for Social Development — and, indeed, other Government Departments — on debt management, but on Members to help and advise their constituents. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, flowers or no flowers for the Minister, the Question is that the motion on the Order Paper be agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the increasing number of pensioners who are experiencing debt and financial difficulties; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a strategy for improving the quality of, and access to, financial advice for older people.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Tourist Potential of Lough Neagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I will not use the full 15 minutes that I have been allotted, in order to allow more Members to participate in the debate. By so doing, we might hear from a wider spectrum around Lough Neagh.

I thank the Business Committee for the opportunity to debate the topic. The development of Lough Neagh is an important subject. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, for attending the debate, and I look forward to hearing her response.

I declare an interest as a council representative on Lough Neagh Partnership and the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann advisory committee. Lough Neagh has great potential as a tourist attraction. It has not been developed to its full extent, and its potential has not been exploited properly to date. Lough Neagh can be clearly identified on any map of Ireland or the North; therefore, we should give it central focus as a tourist attraction.

Lough Neagh is within easy reach from all our airports and ports. It is also easily accessible from the main roads infrastructure of the M2 or M1, and it lies in a central position on the North/South axis. It is in a key position to be developed as a tourist centre. Lough Neagh can be reached using that infrastructure, which should be expanded in every way possible to ensure that the lough is accessible to all.

If Lough Neagh were located in any other part of the island of Ireland, it would be exploited to its full potential. The Minister is from Fermanagh, which has a couple of lakes, so she will know that Lough Neagh's potential has not been fully explored.

The River Shannon and the lakes into which it expands have been fully exploited as a tourist destination, as is evidenced by the many people who visit it. Similarly, everybody knows about the lakes of Killarney. However, no one knows about Lough Neagh and its tourism potential. The tourism potential of those areas has been developed, but why has Lough Neagh's not?

Lough Neagh could be the hub of the North, if one considers the development of the Ulster Canal, and how that links with the River Lagan, the River Bann and the River Blackwater. It could become a roundabout for the North's waterways. The reopening of the Ulster Canal will help to develop Lough Neagh's potential.

Why is Lough Neagh's tourism potential not being developed and exploited in full? First, the lough is in the private ownership of Shaftesbury Estates, which must be paid rent for every post that is put up around the lough and for everything that floats on it. Therefore, the development of the lough is curtailed. Shaftesbury Estates must be paid royalties for it for anything that rests on the bed of the lough. It can also claim royalties for the water from Lough Neagh. The lough should be put in public ownership so that its potential can be fully exploited for the benefit of the citizens who live around it and for the benefit of the tourist industry. Were that to happen, it would also help the Executive to plan ahead so that Lough Neagh's full resources can be fully utilised.

Secondly, Lough Neagh's tourism potential has not been fully developed because the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has never promoted it. Lough Neagh is not one of the Tourist Board's signature projects. One must ask, why? If one looks at any publication that bears a map of Ireland, one will see a blue spot to illustrate Lough Neagh. That had to be explained to some direct rule Ministers when they tried to work out where the orange and green areas were. It had to be pointed out to them that the blue area was not a Conservative area but Lough Neagh.

Forgive me for using a demonstration model, but 'The View', a tourism-promotion magazine that is sent to every MLA, does not even mention Lough Neagh once. It is important that we start to explore the reasons why Lough Neagh has not been developed to its full potential.

Thirdly, Lough Neagh's tourism potential has not been fully developed because it has not been properly funded by public money. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has not promoted the lough for water sports and other activities. In fact, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is the only Department that has directly funded Lough Neagh.

The Tourist Board has not used Lough Neagh as a signature project, or put funding into it, other than into small schemes that the different councils may be using. Invest NI has not used Lough Neagh to its full potential either; it should be trying to attract industry associated with water sports into the area so that facilities can be developed there.

5.45 pm

There is great potential for development not only on the lough but in the surrounding areas and along the rivers that flow into it. That has only been realised due to the Lough Neagh Partnership, which is funded through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The partnership has had good success in promoting Lough Neagh, and it has spent over £200,000 in the past five years on promotion and marketing. However, with the very limited resources that it has, and the potential for local co-operation between the different councils in putting together this partnership, it is very important to get mainstream funding to carry out the marketing of Lough Neagh.

The seven councils around the Lough have been very supportive, both in funding, co-operation and in developing their resources around the area. Craigavon Borough Council, for instance, has done some very good work in relation to the marinas. Other councils have used the same kind of resources to develop the potential of Lough Neagh, although mainly on the outskirts. It is very important to develop the schemes around the lough and to get mainstream funding to do that.

Funding for the next few years is very uncertain and will have to be exploited using the local area groups in the different council areas — and that funding is by no means secure. The Lough Neagh Partnership has no direct funding in the foreseeable future, which is why we need to ensure that the funding is mainstreamed and that it will continue.

The Planning Service points out the need for planning for tourism around camping sites, holiday homes, signage, protection of visitors and tourism assets in its regional policy. We must keep that in mind. The Magherafelt area plan states:

“Realising the tourism potential of the District will continue to require investment in marketing, product development and physical facilities in terms of visitor infrastructure”.

Those issues have been identified both by the Planning Service and by others, and that is what needs to happen if we are to exploit the full potential of Lough Neagh.

Mr McElduff: It is of great interest to me that there are seven constituencies represented in the Adjournment debate today. We are all interested in the tourist potential of Lough Neagh. I invite the Member to join with me in calling on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is in the House today — it is good that she is — to address the issue of job retention in the area. The Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister is often requested to be supportive of the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative in stocking the lough with elvers to sustain the rural industry. I invite the Member to reflect on that and to join with me in asking the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to consult with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister by way of

supporting the co-operative in its campaign to have the lough stocked properly with elvers.

Mr Molloy: I support the Member’s remarks. If we achieve the full tourism potential for Lough Neagh, then many jobs could be retained and exploited.

There must be a strategy to bring Lough Neagh into public ownership, both to protect the water resource that is the lough itself, and to exploit its full potential as a tourist attraction. The Tourist Board must put Lough Neagh on the map as a tourist location and add it to its list of signature projects.

Departments must ensure that they are doing their bit to support the tourist potential of Lough Neagh — the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in particular needs to develop activities on Lough Neagh, such as water sports, angling, boating, and outdoor activities and adventures. Mainstream funding must be put in place to ensure that the full potential of Lough Neagh is realised. I hope that the Minister will give us a favourable reply.

Mr Moutray: I thank the proposer of the topic for the Adjournment debate for bringing this important issue to the House. I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee.

Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles, covering an area of 383 square kilometres. It is the third largest in Europe after Lake Geneva and Lake Constance. The shoreline touches five of the six counties of Northern Ireland.

The tourism potential is immense and is not being fully exploited. Lough Neagh has been, and will continue to be, a central feature in Craigavon borough. It has played, and will continue to play, a dominant role in the development of the Craigavon region.

There is a lot for tourists to see in Craigavon. Craigavon Borough Council has utilised Lough Neagh as best it can with the resources available, and that has brought much tourism to the borough. Kinnego Marina, which is adjacent to the Oxford Island National Nature Reserve, started with only three boat berths in 1983. Now, there are 190 berths and the potential for more. There are also facilities for camping and caravanning.

With 216,000 visitors, the Oxford Island National Nature Reserve was ranked fifth in the top 10 visitor attractions in a 2007 survey by the Northern Ireland Tourism Board. Lough Neagh Sailing Club has grown significantly recently, as has jet-skiing and waterskiing. Other water sports are also growing in popularity, and a canoe trail has been developed in association with the Countryside Access and Activities Network.

However, existing tourist attractions must be improved, and it is important that we do not let them

get stagnant. To make those improvements, there are strategic issues that must be addressed urgently. Lough Neagh requires a navigation authority; old navigation markers still exist, and they can lead to dangerous conditions. In addition, commercial sand dredging and eel fishing take place in the lough as well as leisure facilities. A navigation authority is also required to take account of night-time conditions on the lough. The absence of such an authority increases the danger for those who use the lough, which is inhibiting.

There is also a history of poor water quality. During high-water conditions and after heavy rain, raw sewage often enters the lough at several points around its shores. Therefore, it is important that Northern Ireland Water upgrades all the sewerage outlets into the lough to ensure that the water quality meets EU directives, which will help to improve tourism.

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) policy on shore-based development is also inhibiting tourism potential. I said earlier that Kinnego Marina had 190 boats moored there and that there was potential for more boats. However, the EHS is inhibiting development because of its view on the replacement of an old jetty with a new one, and the opportunity to grow the facility is being hampered.

Movement on the regeneration of the Ulster Canal would also help to improve tourism. A longer-term recreational/economic link with the Erne-Shannon waterway would enable boats to traverse Lough Neagh, enter the Lower Bann at Coleraine and reach the sea.

A joined-up approach is required in all areas to improve the tourism potential of Lough Neagh. The lough is a natural resource and is the jewel in Ulster's crown. Its facilities must be improved. A few weeks ago, I attended the launch of a book by a local author, Mr Brian Cassells, who was born and reared on the shores of the lough. His excellent book, 'By the Shores of Lough Neagh', is testament to the beauty and splendour of the lough and further highlights its tourism potential. Lough Neagh is uniquely positioned in our Province, and we must work together to fully utilise it as an asset now and for future generations.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion and declare an interest as a director of Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network, which works along the shore of Lough Neagh and has funded many projects in and around the lough since 1998.

Lough Neagh, at 383 square kilometres, is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles and it lies in the heart of Northern Ireland. The Mid Ulster constituency, which I am proud to represent, is well named as it comprises the bulk of the western shores of Lough Neagh and the Magherafelt District Council and Cookstown District Council areas. I have long

believed that Lough Neagh's tourism potential has never really been realised.

That was hardly surprising during the Troubles, when the Mid Ulster area suffered greatly from IRA terrorism. However, even during those bad days, other parts of the Province that suffered still managed to retain a degree of tourism than was greater than that of my constituency.

Fortunately, the past decade has brought great changes for the better in Northern Ireland as a whole. The tourism industry is one of the main beneficiaries of that. Between 1998 and 2005, tourist numbers rose from 1.4 million, worth £217 million, to almost 2 million, which generated revenue of over £357 million. The north coast, the Fermanagh lakelands and the kingdom of Mourne have all successfully cashed in on the tourist boom, and rightly so. The city of Belfast has also been rejuvenated. In 2007, the Lonely Planet tourism guide described it as one of the top 10 cities to visit.

It is time that a serious and concerted effort was made to develop and market Lough Neagh as a major leisure destination to the benefit of tourists and locals alike. Having lived all of my life on the western shores of Lough Neagh, I am in no doubt that its natural beauty compares well to any that the rest of Northern Ireland has to offer.

Mid Ulster already has lough-shore facilities, such as the Loughshore Trail cycle route and the Ballyronan Marina. Those, together with similar facilities on the northern, eastern and southern shores of the lough, such as Kinnego Marina, Craigavon Watersports Centre, and pleasure boats, such as the Maid of Antrim, must be upgraded and enhanced in order to benefit tourists and locals alike.

There is great potential for water sports, such as sailing, canoeing, waterskiing and jet-skiing on the lough. There is also the prospect that the Ulster Canal will be reopened in order to link Lough Neagh with Lough Erne and the entire Erne-Shannon Waterway.

Of course, there are also several nature reserves on Oxford Island. I urge the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to enter into partnerships with the councils that border the lough and explore initiatives to improve the area's infrastructure — particularly waterfront hotels and restaurant facilities — in order to promote the lough as a tourist destination in its own right.

There is no doubt that the lough and the natural beauty of its surrounding area provide the necessary raw material. The friendliness of the area's people is also an asset. They have a good story to tell. All that the area needs is investment and the vision to market the idea. Lough Neagh is a wonderful place. The locals have had it to themselves for too long. The time has come to share it, and we are willing to do so.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, must declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and, perhaps, more importantly, as a lifelong resident of the southern shores of Lough Neagh. I was reared literally across the road from the lough. I currently live a quarter of a mile from the shore.

I am the eldest of eight children in my family. Every single one of us learned how to swim in Lough Neagh. Swimming lessons consisted mainly of my father throwing us into the water and telling us to swim. Indeed, it was a quick way to pick up the technique.

Lighters used to sail on the lough. Some Members have referred to the sand-dredging and commercial barges that sailed on it. The downside of that is that in 1982 I lost a friend who got caught in one of the sand holes, as they were called. There are navigational problems on the lough. Certainly, great gaps in boating safety occur when people do not know their way around the lough. That must be examined. The Lough Neagh Partnership has commissioned work on that, although I am not sure how far it has progressed.

In certain places, such as the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre at Oxford Island, the lough's assets have been promoted and money has been spent. The discovery centre has won several green awards for conservation as well as awards for tourism and for its information and interpretive facilities.

Of course, Lough Neagh cannot be promoted in isolation. That must be tied in with the Ulster Canal project. Portmore Lough is also in my constituency, and it has one of the largest Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserves in the North. The loughs are beside each other. It is most unfortunate that the Tourist Board does not consider Craigavon as a tourist destination. As a result, there is a great shortage of accommodation in the area.

I understand that there has been growth in the tourism industry in areas such as hill walking and activity holidays, but very often there is nowhere for people to stay around the lough shore itself.

6.00 pm

A neighbour of mine has an equestrian centre beside Portmore Lough, an area that has great development potential. I was a founding member of the Gawley's Gate Quay Company, which took advantage of LEADER+ and Lough Neagh Partnership money, and installed a quay at the back of a restaurant. As a consequence of that, planning permission has been approved for holiday homes. A wee bit of money to pump-prime investment provides a huge advantage, and there is a great deal of interest in the future of that type of holiday accommodation.

It is true to say that Lough Neagh is not solely the responsibility of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment. It is, as we all know, one of the major reserves of drinking water. It is most unfortunate, therefore, that the water quality is below European standards. We must look to the Minister of Agriculture to determine how water courses are managed. I remember seeing the ministry men, years ago, out cleaning the drains and the water courses all the time; I no longer see that. As Mr Moutray mentioned, there are many concerns about sewage treatment. That is something that we must get right. Local people no longer swim in the lough. I spent whole summers on the shores of Lough Neagh, but my children rarely spend time there because of the pollution. A large part of that is due to the sewerage infrastructure.

I was reared beside local fishermen, but fishermen nowadays have huge concerns about the quality of the water. They report that, in the centre of the lough, many fish are found floating dead on top of the water. Lough Neagh has sustained a vibrant rural community, not only the farmers and dairy farmers on the lough shores, but the small fishing companies, which are fairly unique to Northern Ireland because, I think, freshwater eel is not found anywhere else. According to the archaic laws under which people used to live, those eels were only for export.

I congratulate Mr Molloy for bringing this debate to the Chamber. It is opportune that we look at the advantages that Lough Neagh presents us with. He is right to say that the ownership of Lough Neagh's bed and soil remaining with Shaftesbury Estate of Lough Neagh Ltd is untenable. I understand that all political parties, if not all councils that have access to the shoreline, want to have that ownership returned to the people who live around the lough shore.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. All the Members who spoke outlined the historic and scenic significance of Lough Neagh and its hinterland. It is a very ancient place of settlement of the island of Ireland, and it has a long history. The communities that live around Lough Neagh are long established, and some of them are entitled to be called historic — historic because they have existed for a long time, not necessarily because of the age of the people.

Lough Neagh has always been a dominant feature on the map of Ireland. The role played by the communities on its shores has been assured in the history of Ireland. Therefore, one must question why Lough Neagh qualifies as one of the best kept secrets in Ireland. That question is implicit in the debate that my colleague has initiated. Why is there an absence of a structured and properly resourced tourism strategy? Economic investment in tourism would pay for itself. A tourism initiative would be a self-financing initiative that would add significantly to the regional economy and potential.

I welcome the Minister's attendance at the debate. She is the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I look forward to hearing her say, as an enterprising Minister, that the failure of the Tourist Board to market Lough Neagh and its historic and beautiful landscape properly will be rectified.

I could repeat what other Members said, but that is unnecessary in the circumstances. The case is irrefutable; such a gap in the Tourist Board's presentation of its product should not exist. The board's failure must be challenged and corrected. I hope that today's debate marks the beginning of that process.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest, not as a member of Cookstown District Council but as a resident of the shores of Lough Neagh. I was brought up within 500 yards of the lough, as was my colleague Dolores, and my family history there goes back a long way. Earlier generations included fishermen from Tyrone on my maternal side and from the south Derry side, where I grew up.

As I speak to the debate, the area is nearest and dearest to my heart. I compliment and thank Mr Molloy for securing today's important debate.

Through my council work, I have been involved with several projects to improve the infrastructure and general tourism potential of Lough Neagh. Before 2003, all the local council projects to develop tourism along the shores were valuable and praiseworthy. They were worthwhile and laudable community projects but somewhat piecemeal, and a strategic approach was sadly lacking.

The Lough Neagh Partnership was established in 2003. Its remit included sustainable development and the promotion of the entire Lough Neagh area through the management of a £3.2 million development fund, which was part of the rural development programme. Over the past five years, over 130 projects have been given funding assistance: the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre was refurbished; the new Kinnego marina was built; and in an area that I know well, Ballyronan marina was improved and Battery harbour marina was refurbished. New jetties were built at Antrim and Cranfield, and the Maid of Antrim was refurbished.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member listed several developments that are in keeping with Lough Neagh. However, does he share my view that the application by Rose Energy to install an incinerator on the shores of Lough Neagh is entirely at odds with the area's tourism strategy? Lough Neagh is the wrong location for that incinerator.

Mr McGlone: I agree, and, wearing a different hat now, I know that concerned residents have raised that issue. It will remain an issue for several Departments

for some time; DOE is responsible for planning, DETI for grant aid and DARD for rural development.

That brings me to DARD's rural development programme. The local councils have been the only investors in Lough Neagh; DCAL has offered them virtually no investment or partnership. That Department has responsibility for the development of inland waterways. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which is responsible for developing tourism infrastructure and the promotion of the North of Ireland, has not provided any investment. There is a real need for further investment in, and focus on, the lough from those bodies, and I hope that that message is loud and clear.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, formerly the Environment and Heritage Service, invested a small amount in the lough, but it was mostly for the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Advisory Committees. The potential duplication of roles in the partnership and the advisory body must be resolved.

The new rural development programme is to be allocated to the new local action groups and joint councils. That may result in piecemeal investment around the entire lough and even in the demise of the Lough Neagh Partnership.

The future tourism priorities for the lough include a navigation and dredging service for the lough and rivers; a warden to implement water directives; a recreational management strategy; the development of recreational angling; a marina facility at Antrim; the marketing and promotion of the lough and the hosting of quality events; the maintenance of the Lough Neagh cycle trail; the development of a heritage trail around the lough; and the retention of the Lough Neagh Partnership as an overall implementation and development body. Those measures help to protect water resources and exploit tourism potential.

I have outlined my major concerns, and Members could probably discuss those all evening. The lough's beauty and heritage must be shared with others, and support for the debate will help to achieve that aim. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for missing the start of the debate. I have listened carefully to Members' comments, and it is clear that the Adjournment debate is supported by all sides of the Chamber. People recognise that Lough Neagh is a potential tourist destination, and there is potential for economic development of areas around the lough, many of which are socio-economically deprived.

As Dolores Kelly said, the Tourist Board does not recognise Craigavon's tourist potential. I challenge any Tourist Board representative to drive down the Bay Rampart, Skelton's Rampart or Byrne's Rampart onto

the Ardmore Road in Derrytrasna and along the edge of Lough Neagh — especially at this time of year — and argue that it is not a tourist destination. The autumn colours and the sight of birds arriving at, and leaving, the lough are beautiful. That tourist potential should be investigated. Furthermore, we must not overlook the ancient settlements around Mrs Kelly's area in Derrymore near Lough Neagh. Although I am not implying that Mrs Kelly is ancient, I am sure that the tourist potential was good when her father was throwing her into the lough.

We must not exploit Lough Neagh, rather develop its tourist potential to protect the environment for future generations. As well as sightseeing, that area offers many activities that appeal to tourists, such as fishing, speedboating, canoeing, and so on. Lough Neagh can facilitate all those activities, and it is a nice destination for family drives at the weekend.

However, there are hazards in the lough, as well as potential hazards to the lough's future. The navigation authority must consider Lough Neagh, and I understand that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is examining a report on navigation in Lough Neagh. I hope that that report is processed as quickly as possible.

Sewage — particularly in the rivers that flow into the lough — is another potential hazard to the lough's future. The Closet River, which is polluted beyond belief, flows into the lough only half a mile from where water is extracted for drinking. All those dangers must be examined.

Moreover, the eutrophication of the lough — whereby nitrogen from farmland causes pollution — and the pollution from domestic washing products entering the lough through the sewerage system, are hazards. We must adopt a cross-departmental approach to secure its future. I hope that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will consider how the lough's tourist potential can be promoted.

Some things came to mind as I listened to the debate. For example, it is impossible to cycle the whole way around Lough Neagh, and a bridge must be installed at the Bannfoot at Derrytrasna to enable people to do so. The tourist potential of the Maghera area has not been fully realised and must be examined. Lurgan offers excellent facilities, such as the Oxford Island National Nature Reserve and Kinnego Marina.

Other parts of my constituency have tourist development potential that can be realised, perhaps through cottage accommodation or through the installation of more marinas or piers. For instance, the old pier at the Pier Rampart in Derrytrasna has fallen into disrepair. A small investment would enable people to dock at that site, come ashore and explore the surrounding countryside. Small sums of money could make a major difference to the rural community who

live on the lough's edge. Furthermore, that small investment could make a major difference to the future growth of Lough Neagh's tourist potential.

Mr Shannon: As I represent the Strangford constituency, Members may ask what on earth I have to contribute to this debate. I will speak on a topic that has not yet been touched on — birds. I am sorry; in fairness to John O'Dowd, he mentioned birds in passing.

I consider that a particular aspect of the tourist potential of Lough Neagh has yet to be realised. Shooting sports are worth £45 million to the Northern Ireland economy; furthermore, shooting contributes £10 million towards conservation through wildfowling clubs and conservation bodies. That totals £55 million. The sport employs 2,100 people in a full-time capacity. No other Member is aware of what wildfowling clubs do around Lough Neagh. That is why I am speaking —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Shannon: Mr Deputy Speaker, will you allow me extra time if I give way? I will give way on that condition.

Mr McGlone: I intervene only to say that perhaps I am aware of what those clubs do.

Mr Shannon: I know that that is the case, and I am surprised that the Member did not mention it. Now that he has referred to it, it can be recorded.

6.15 pm

Lough Neagh has great winter-tourism potential. Members may ask what on earth can be done between 1 September and 31 January, when the weather is so poor. However, that is the wildfowling season. For wildfowlers, the harder the wind blows, the harder the rain falls, and the colder it is, the more attractive the conditions. Wildfowlers come from all over the United Kingdom, particularly from Northern Ireland, to the Lough Neagh wildfowling clubs. Therefore, the potential for attracting wildfowlers from across the water is immense.

I participate in the sport in the Strangford Lough area, and it is a tremendous experience to face into a gale, when one can hardly see because the wind blows into one's eyes — despite one's glasses — with geese and ducks flying overhead. It is an experience that one should not miss.

The potential for winter tourism has not been realised in Northern Ireland, and no Member has drawn attention to that point.

Lough Neagh is important for several reasons. It is a major migratory route for wildfowl, including wigeon, mallard, teal and geese. That potential has not yet been realised, and it should be in order to benefit the area.

I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to my points. In considering how to increase the tourism

potential of Lough Neagh, I hope that wildfowling will have its proper place.

There are many spin-offs to be exploited. Obviously, there is great enjoyment to be had by the shooting fraternity itself — the wildfowling. However, there are also economic spin-offs for those who run bed-and-breakfast accommodation, restaurants, cafes, petrol stations, and those who manage boating businesses on Lough Neagh. Individuals and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) clubs make a major investment. I declare an interest, as I am a member of BASC and the Countryside Alliance Northern Ireland. Both organisations have done excellent work in Lough Neagh.

The connection with Strangford Lough is that Strangford Lough Wildfowling and Conservation Association owns an island in Lough Neagh and runs it as a conservation project. That demonstrates that body's commitment to the area.

As the Member who proposed the topic for debate said, Lough Neagh is owned by Shaftesbury Estates of Lough Neagh Ltd. Leases are handed out to the wildfowling clubs on the shores of Lough Neagh. I believe that the activities of those clubs, along with those of environmentalists and others, are the reason that wildfowl return to Lough Neagh each year. The potential that the sport could create must be considered. Permits for shooting may be bought by wildfowling from overseas or from the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, that aspect of winter tourism should be taken advantage of in much the same way as is done on Lough Erne and on the waterways of the River Shannon down below.

I am beginning to wonder how far my constituency will extend — will it go as far as Lough Erne, Lough Neagh or the waterways of the River Shannon in the Republic of Ireland? By the way, I am descended from the Stewarts of the Lowlands of Scotland, and the name Shannon is derived from them.

I am aware that my time is running out, but I should say that we have very high-quality gun-tackle and clothing shops in the area, both for live-quarry and clay-target shooting.

Donal McCloy, whom Patsy McGlone knows well, runs the largest sporting-gun dealership not just in Northern Ireland, but the whole of Ireland. Charlie Keenan supplies hunting and shooting gear, and is also involved in film production — that is another area that could be explored.

Conservation must also be borne in mind. Let us take all the issues on board and make things work for Lough Neagh. I support that aim, even though I live on the edge of Strangford Lough. I want to see progress made for the benefit of the wildfowling clubs around

Lough Neagh, because there is a potential that has yet to be realised.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Shannon, I remind you that shooting was once promoted in County Mayo. Not only were all the birds shot, but all the branches off the trees. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Representatives from five of Northern Ireland's counties have talked about Lough Neagh during this debate, so I will add my voice from Fermanagh. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the tourism potential of Lough Neagh. As has been mentioned, it is the biggest freshwater lough in the British Isles. It has a number of unique characteristics, and, depending on one's perspective — although it is not the perspective of the Members who are present in the House — it is either perceived as a barrier in the heart of Northern Ireland or as something that bonds together five of the six counties of the Province and six of our local authorities.

I prefer to think of it in the latter way, and there are strong opportunities to maximise the benefits that tourism can bring — including the wigeon. I used to have a dog named Wigeon, but I do not think that that was the wigeon to which Mr Shannon referred.

Mr Shannon: Are you a wildfowler?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: He was a cocker spaniel. *[Laughter.]*

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's 'Strategic Framework for Action' took the lead in identifying where the tourism sector needed to prioritise efforts. I am aware that some people believe that there is too much focus on those projects, at the expense of other equally deserving parts of Northern Ireland. However, it is important that the five signature projects, which are central to that strategic framework, be completed as planned. The Executive have provided the money for those projects and, ultimately, they will benefit all the people of Northern Ireland.

I say that in the full knowledge that Members who are present would have liked Lough Neagh to have been the basis for a signature project. I certainly would have liked the Fermanagh Lakelands to have been the basis for a signature project, but we are where we are. I readily agree that the signature projects are not the only show in town — I am very clear about that, and Mr Molloy made that comment at the start of this debate.

We need a good-quality tourism product to sell in the local and international marketplaces. The Tourist Board's draft corporate plan identified product portfolios, including culture and heritage, about which we heard from Members opposite, sports tourism, waterways, and business tourism, which is becoming a big part of what the Tourist Board is trying to achieve.

All those portfolios can be of considerable benefit to the Lough Neagh area.

The Tourist Board provides assistance for non-accommodation projects, and Invest Northern Ireland provides accommodation-related support. The level and distribution of that assistance is governed by project appraisal and the number and scale of applications received. In a recent call for applications under its tourism-development scheme, the Tourist Board received 28 applications from within the six council areas that border the lough. Those applications are at various stages of appraisal.

It is important to remember — and this is a comment that Members made — that not all of the tourism-development money, or money that can benefit tourism, sits within my Department and its agencies. Many other Departments were referred to during the debate, including DARD, with its rural development programme; and DSD and DCAL, which both have funds that benefit tourism in a number of ways. Local councils also have sources of funds, and the private sector has a key role to play in product development.

Comments were made in relation to DCAL, and although I am not aware of all the issues that concern that Department, it continues to work with local authorities and agencies to make progress on recreational and tourism facilities at Lough Neagh. During an intervention, Mr McElduff made a point about the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society. I will pass on those comments to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

A good range of visitor accommodation is a prerequisite for success. I heard the comments that were made about bed-and-breakfast accommodation around the lough, and the fact that more is needed. We all want to see visitors staying in our areas, rather than passing through to somewhere else.

I want, and look forward to, the further development of the accommodation sector, which is a key area of opportunity for the private sector. Nevertheless, I hear what Members are saying about it.

I know that Mr Molloy is a member of the Lough Neagh Partnership, and I shall say a few words about its work. The partnership is an excellent example of what can be achieved when everyone pulls together. It has produced the 'Lough Neagh: Discover it for Yourself' brochure and the Discover Lough Neagh website, both of which demonstrate that there is a wealth of things to do in, around and, indeed, on the lough.

Although Lough Neagh and its products are promoted by the Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, the Countryside Access and Activities Network — the Lough Neagh canoe trail, to which Mr Moutray and other Members referred, was also supported by Sport

NI — the regional tourism partnership, and, of course, the local authorities, the Lough Neagh Partnership provides a focus for visitors and its work brings the area to life.

It is a challenge for local people to secure economic benefits for their areas by identifying and creating opportunities for visitors to spend money, Lough Neagh is well positioned for local people to do that, and the Lough Neagh Partnership is playing a key role.

Mr McLaughlin spoke about the Tourist Board, and other Members spoke about other Departments, playing a role in attracting tourism to the lough. In common with the Strangford Lough Management Committee — with which Mr Shannon familiarised me — the Lough Neagh Partnership is greatly strengthened by local input, because local people are able to lobby the statutory authorities to produce the measures that are required for their particular area. The strength of local advocacy has been clearly demonstrated in the Chamber today, and I believe that it will continue to be demonstrated through the partnership.

Members will say that that is all very well, but what about the partnership's funding? Recently, the Lough Neagh Partnership secured nearly £500,000 of funding, and the Department will review that in the future. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that local people are the best tourism advocates for their areas — obviously, working with the statutory agencies, such as the Tourist Board — and that is something that the Department must consider.

However, it would be remiss of me to say that we are living in a land of milk and honey. We are living in difficult economic times, and the Executive have set ambitious targets for the tourism sector, including increasing revenue by 40% and visitor numbers by 25% by 2011. Tourism, like other sectors, relies on consumer confidence and discretionary spending, and, following a decade of solid growth, there will be challenges ahead. As consumer spending power reduces, the competition between destinations intensifies. The Lough Neagh area has much to offer, and the fact that Belfast International Airport is on its doorstep adds to its advantages.

A quality experience is the key to success, and the Tourist Board will be focusing its efforts on developing programmes to support the tourism sector's ability to compete internationally. When people are persuaded to come to Northern Ireland, they must have a choice of places to go — whether through the signature projects or through other destination projects, such as Fermanagh and, indeed, Lough Neagh. Although overseas pure-holiday visitor numbers have performed strongly in the past decade, our close-to-home markets still deliver almost 80% of the visitors to Northern Ireland, and the Tourist Board must reflect, and is reflecting, deeply on that.

The Tourist Board is delivering a strong programme of themed campaigns in the Republic of Ireland, and, recently, it ran a successful campaign to encourage visitors to the island of Ireland to consider a trip to Northern Ireland. Feedback suggests that visitors were impressed by what there is to see and do, and that is why the multiplicity of activities around Lough Neagh will be a strong selling point.

Lough Neagh has much to offer visitors — I believe that Mr McLaughlin spoke about hill walking in the area — and much has been done to attract them. It will be a job of work to further develop those attractions, and it is essential that, while taking advantage of the opportunities that are available to us now, we address the challenges that lie ahead. I look forward to continuing to work with the Lough Neagh Partnership, which, given that Lough Neagh touches five counties and six local authority areas, is the key to developing tourism, and I hope to welcome many more visitors to the area and beyond to Fermanagh.

Adjourned at 6.29 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 3 November 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Public Expenditure: September Monitoring 2008-2009

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the public expenditure September monitoring round for the 2008-09 financial year.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): With permission, I will make a statement regarding the outcome of the September monitoring round, following the First Minister and deputy First Minister's approval of the recommendations by the less-than-satisfactory means of urgent procedure. I am in a position to announce to the Assembly a sum of almost £50 million in funding allocations for local public services across a range of Departments.

In my statement to the Assembly on the June monitoring round, I highlighted the substantial public expenditure pressure that had come to light in respect of the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claim, as well as the impact of the downturn in the property market. In response, the Executive agreed to adopt a two-stage process whereby only limited allocations would be made as part of the June monitoring round, with the position to be reviewed when negotiations with the Treasury were completed.

Over the summer and early autumn, work has been ongoing to address the equal pay pressure faced by the Executive, and discussions are continuing with the Treasury — at official and ministerial level — on how to minimise the impact on public services. Engagements with the aim of resolving the issue have commenced with the trade union, and they will continue.

The one-off payment to staff could cost in excess of £100 million, although Members will appreciate that that figure is dependent on a range of factors that we are in the process of considering. The Executive remain mindful of the need to ensure a fair deal for the

civil servants affected, although there is the potential for a significant impact on public services from a provision of that amount.

In that context, we are also seeking to ensure that the public expenditure implications are managed in a way that does not require reductions to the spending plans for future years that were agreed and announced by the Executive in January.

It remains my clear belief that the equal pay claim is a legacy issue for the United Kingdom Government. However, at the same time, we cannot ignore the broader UK public expenditure context. In recent weeks, I have met both the Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to press the case for Northern Ireland on equal pay, as well as a range of other measures, including the level and duration of winter fuel payments.

The equal pay issue involves a large number of complex issues and thus, as the employee representatives have pointed out, may involve protracted negotiations. Therefore, although I recognise the desire of staff on the lowest pay scales to receive payment as soon as possible, a final settlement may not be reached for some time.

As regards capital receipts, the property market has shown little sign of improvement since June monitoring, with Departments still indicating that they expect a significant shortfall against the planned revenue from asset disposals this year. That, in turn, impacts on the Executive's investment programme. Although Departments are taking steps to address the shortfall, the position on housing receipts remains difficult.

The continuing instability in local property and national financial markets was highlighted last Friday when it was announced that the Workplace 2010 project would be suspended. That will allow time to assess the impact of recent changes in the financial and property markets on the proposed procurement. In addition, the continuing media speculation that the remaining bidders for the contract will come under common ownership had the potential to affect the procurement process. Although that confirms that the potential £175 million capital receipt for the project will not now be realised in this financial year, it was no longer possible to proceed uninterrupted with the project at a time when there was such unprecedented uncertainty in the financial and property markets.

Workplace 2010 procurement will be reviewed early in 2009, by which time we hope that the present uncertainties affecting the process will have been clarified. I remain committed to the principles underpinning the Workplace 2010 project, and the Civil Service will continue to work towards creating a modern, flexible working environment for its staff that will enable the delivery of better public services.

As regards the impact on the Executive's investment programme, we must recognise that the nature of capital investment projects means that there will always be some degree of uncertainty in the precise timing of both expenditure and receipts. Rather than adopt an overly cautious and conservative position in setting out our spending ambitions for capital projects for the next decade, the Executive adopted an approach that sought to encourage Departments to seek to deliver the greatest possible level of investment in public infrastructure over the Budget period and beyond.

At the same time, however, the Executive were prudent in committing funding to projects, particularly in the early years of the period covered by the investment strategy. In addition, the position on capital expenditure has been proactively managed during the subsequent in-year monitoring process. That has meant that over £130 million was available following the September monitoring round to address potential shortfalls in the overall capital position for the remainder of this financial year.

It is also expected that additional capital resources will become available during the second half of this financial year, as some projects spend less before next April than was planned initially. Therefore, I believe that there is sufficient scope to accommodate the loss of the Workplace 2010 receipt during the remaining months of this financial year without the need for action to scale other projects currently under way.

A further issue that has arisen since June monitoring relates to Northern Ireland Water, which was previously classified as a public corporation. Although the final decisions have yet to be made on the future funding arrangements for local water and sewerage services, Her Majesty's Treasury has indicated that the company should be reclassified this year as being within central Government. That is in light of the fact that the company does not derive a sufficient share of its income from customer charges to still be considered a public corporation and is, therefore, largely a technical matter. However, it has real-world implications on the level of Budget cover required to support the company, the scale of which will be dependent on the outcome of the ongoing discussions with the Treasury.

Members will also be aware of the significant increases in household energy bills announced in recent months, which has placed an intolerable burden on households at a time of rising unemployment and uncertainty in the banking sector. Although it would be pure delusion to suggest that, on their own, the Executive or the Assembly can resolve issues that have worldwide impacts, it is also important that we recognise the actions taken already by the Executive.

Those include the freeze on regional rates that was announced as part of last year's Budget, and the

deferral of water charges. That means that those costs are significantly lower in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. In addition, the concessionary fares scheme will be extended this year in order to provide free public transport for everyone aged 60 and over, while generous Budget allocations to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) have enabled plans to be put in place in order to abolish prescription charges.

Although there is a need to go further, it is essential that that is done in a way that leads to a sustainable solution rather than adopting seemingly attractive quick fixes that build in recurrent costs to the detriment of the delivery of public services more generally. To that end, I am taking forward a cross-cutting fuel poverty action plan, which will involve working with the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Once completed, that work will be submitted for agreement by the Executive and for consideration as part of the December monitoring round.

It is clear that the overall context for the September monitoring round is, perhaps, even more constrained than was the case in the previous monitoring round. However, unlike the situation in June, there is now less scope to defer decisions in light of the emerging pressures that Departments have identified. As regards current expenditure, the Executive concluded the June monitoring round with an overcommitment of £85 million. That figure has been offset by the £41.1 million of reduced requirements that Departments identified, although the total amount of reduced requirements in the year to date remains below that in recent years. Further details on the reduced requirements that were declared in the September monitoring round are set out in table 1 of my statement.

In addition, the latest forecasts from Departments, as set out in table 2 of the statement, suggest that little further current expenditure will be released through to the end of the financial year. However, Departments indicated close to full spend at this time in the 2007-08 financial year, yet then declared significant levels of reduced requirements in the later monitoring rounds, as well as a high level of underspend. In that context, therefore, I repeat the call for Committees to challenge robustly the expenditure performance of all Departments in order to ensure that resources become available for reallocation as early as possible so that we can make the best use of the resources at the Executive's disposal.

Although departmental forecasts have tended to be overly pessimistic in that respect, there is a need to leave scope in order to address pressures that emerge later in the year. It was, therefore, agreed that there were sufficient resources to make £21 million in

current expenditure allocations to Departments, against the £137 million of spending proposals that Departments submitted.

The allocations that were agreed include a further £5 million for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as part of the first call on available resources agreed in the Budget process; £5 million for extended schools, in recognition of that programme's importance — although I remain of the view that those funds could have been found from the Department's own resources; and some £3.5 million in order to address pressures in respect of animal health, as the rising market price of animals has implications for the level of compensation payments.

A figure of £1.5 million was allocated to the flood-relief scheme for payments to households and district councils after the severe weather conditions in August, and £2.5 million as a contribution to the increased cost of the special purchase of evacuated dwellings scheme — although I hope that the Department for Social Development (DSD) will take steps to meet the remainder of the additional costs. In addition, £1.5 million was allocated to help to meet the increased costs of establishing the new Northern Ireland library authority, and £500,000 for the re-imaging communities initiative, which supports local communities as they replace divisive symbols and murals of the past with images that are a positive celebration of the future. Finally, £1.5 million was allocated in order to enhance the collection of rates arrears, with the additional revenue being used to meet the residual costs of Civil Service reform rather than that pressure being met from the scarce resources available in this monitoring round.

I explained the approach to managing the in-year capital position, including holding back more than £130 million to set against the pressures emerging on in-year budgets due to the impact of the downturn in the property market and the wider difficulties in financial markets. There is also continuing uncertainty surrounding the technical reclassification of Northern Ireland Water.

However, there was judged to be scope for limited capital allocations, and the following were agreed: £15 million to the Department for Social Development in order to address 30% of the remaining capital receipts shortfall after proactive action by the Department to minimise the pressure on its housing programme. In not meeting the full shortfall now, the Department for Social Development is being encouraged to continue to maximise its capital receipts in the current financial year.

12.15 pm

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) will receive £6.2 million for work at Warrenpoint

harbour, which, although fully committed, has slipped since the 2007-08 financial year.

The Department of the Environment (DOE) will receive £1.9 million for the Electronic Planning Information for Citizens (e-PIC) system, which will enhance the operation of the Planning Service, and £1.9 million for the implementation of aspects of the cross-departmental Civil Service reform programme.

The allocations mean that the Executive leave the September monitoring round with a planned overcommitment in current expenditure of £65 million and an under-commitment of £132 million in capital expenditure. Although the position on the Workplace 2010 project has crystallised, that risk had already been incorporated into our plans for the current financial year. Therefore, confirmation of the Workplace 2010 position will not require significant changes to be made to our plans, or my recommendations, on the September monitoring round. However, it does highlight that the downturn in the property market has affected the public sector as well as private developers.

Northern Ireland Departments still plan to deliver their highest-ever level of investment in capital projects in the current financial year, which will provide significant help for the local construction sector. However, it must be recognised that the Executive have limited scope to go further than their current plans. Following the boom of the past few years, the construction sector should focus on making the structural changes necessary to allow it to compete on a sustainable basis over the longer term.

The Executive entered the September monitoring round facing a range of pressures at strategic level and at departmental level. The wider financial situation meant that it was not possible to address all those pressures at this stage. However, a prudent and responsible approach is being taken, which balances the need to address the immediate pressures faced by Departments and the creation of sufficient flexibility to accommodate pressures that may emerge in the remainder of the financial year. I commend the September monitoring position to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the courtesy that he and his officials afforded the Deputy Chairperson and me in briefing us on it.

The Budget for 2008-09 included a planned capital receipt of £175 million from the Workplace 2010 project. The Minister outlined the position regarding Workplace 2010, and the project's suspension was announced last Friday. That was the correct decision, and I agree that it was prudent and responsible. The Minister also outlined how the shortfall will be managed, and it is

important that the Minister believes that a black hole will not open in the economy, despite comments to the contrary from some people in the media.

Capital receipts for all Departments in the current financial year were projected at £486 million. Will the Minister comment on the extent to which that target will be met and the work of the capital assets realisation team in that regard? During a recent briefing with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials, the Committee was informed that all Departments had reassured the central finance group that they would spend their entire budget in the current financial year. Indeed, the September monitoring allocations forecast that underspend will be zero after the reduced requirements have been taken into account. Is the Minister confident that cross-departmental underspend will be minimal at the end of the current financial year?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for his contribution. I welcome what he said about the position of the Workplace 2010 project. Given the unprecedented conditions in the financial and property markets, the decision to suspend that project was correct. Capital receipts represented less than 10% of the overall gross investment by the Northern Ireland Departments in 2008-09. Our in-year investment programmes have already set aside some £130 million to deal with the implications of the volatility in the property and financial markets.

Slippage on planned capital spending is also likely before the end of the year. In those circumstances, the issue will be revisited in early 2009 in order to take stock of the financial position and the two companies involved in the bidding process — in that context, there has been considerable speculation about a merger.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel also talked about capital receipts and the downturn in the property market, which I mentioned in my statement. That situation has improved little since it was dealt with in the June monitoring round and substantial amounts of capital funding have been set aside in order to manage it proactively. There will be reduced in-year requirements coming through and, given the scale of the projects, some slippage will occur. That ties in with the Committee Chairperson's last point — about Departments forecasting that they will spend their full financial allocations. My statement pointed out that that has been a recurring theme over the years. Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that that is what Departments are saying. However, given what has happened historically, and the nature of the process, it is expected that the position will be much clearer in the December monitoring round and as we move towards the end of the financial year.

I could stop everything now; halt everything in its tracks, cease all spending and take up a very cautious position. That may suit me, but it would not be good for the local construction industry or for Departments. The best way to manage the situation is through careful monitoring; setting aside money while recognising the reality of what might happen later on, and taking a detailed look at the situation in December. That approach avoids taking money away from Departments; something which I am determined to avoid doing at all costs. Ultimately, Departments must be able to deliver on the priorities, objectives and goals of the Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: It is understandable that the Minister's statement has attracted a lot of interest in the House and quite a number of Members wish to ask questions. I remind Members that they must ask a question — not make a further statement or ask multiple questions. If Members bear that in mind, all those with questions may get an opportunity to speak.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will do my best to comply.

I thank the Minister for his statement and I agree with him; the agreement of the statement by urgent procedure is less than ideal. All Executive decisions affecting Departments must be taken at Executive meetings.

The Minister mentioned many emerging pressures and his discussions with the Treasury on a range of issues. Has he considered asking the Treasury for greater access to Northern Ireland's stock of end-year flexibility? I also remind the Minister of the concerns that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has raised consistently about the lack of funding for Civil Service reform projects. Will the Minister assure Members that those projects remain a priority and on-track to be implemented given their importance in realising efficiencies?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for his remarks. I agree that it is less than satisfactory to use urgent procedure in order to proceed with the monitoring round and allocate money to Departments. It is probably less than they would like, but £50 million is a considerable amount of capital and current funding that will enable Departments to manage their budgets and move forward.

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

It is less than satisfactory that the matter is being dealt with by urgent procedure, because it cuts out the opportunity for discussion, debate and consideration around the Executive table. It is vital that that should happen. It is unsatisfactory, by any stretch of the imagination, that matters cannot be discussed and agreed at Executive meetings.

Mr Hamilton mentioned end-year flexibility; we continue to press the Treasury on the issue. At the end of the year, any underspend goes back into the Treasury, and we have to negotiate that. It is all the more important, therefore, that money that is not required is released during the in-year monitoring round and reallocated as quickly as possible. We are negotiating the position on end-year flexibility as part of our ongoing discussions on equal pay, and it will be extremely important to have access to the money as quickly as possible.

I assure Mr Hamilton that the Northern Ireland Civil Service reform projects are proceeding. Civil Service reform is important to realise efficiencies and, most importantly, to deliver a better service to the public. At the end of the day, that is what Civil Service reform is all about.

I hope to be in a position shortly to announce progress on some projects that come under that agenda. As the Member will be aware from my statement, money has been allocated in this monitoring round to address some of the issues regarding funding for taking forward cross-departmental, cross-cutting projects that will benefit all Departments and people across Northern Ireland.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his statement. The First Minister recently claimed responsibility for almost every good initiative that the Executive have managed to produce, including free prescriptions, which required a lot of money. Will he then take responsibility for the frighteningly large black hole of potentially £500 million in the Executive Budget? What will be his responsibilities in the crushing effect of the emerging shortfall of a further £500 million hole in the coffers of the Department for Regional Development?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his succinct question. It is not a new question, but I will answer it again for the third or fourth time.

Mr McNarry: I will keep on asking it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am sure that the Member will keep on asking the question, because nothing seems to be getting through. Nevertheless, I will have a go at answering it.

There is no black hole in the Budget. I should be happy for officials to sit down with the honourable Member. I sincerely mean that — leaving aside the knockabout stuff — because he is a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, and it is important that Committee members have an opportunity to discuss the process with officials. However, I assure him that there is no black hole in the Budget.

There is nothing new in the idea that Governments face spending pressures. It happens all the time, and I have been very open about that in various statements to the Assembly on the in-year financial position. The Executive have the in-year monitoring process so that resources no longer required by certain business areas can be used to meet pressures in others.

The Member talked about a black hole, but we have set aside £130 million in the capital budget. In 2007-08, £230 million in current expenditure and £270 million in capital expenditure were declared surplus by Departments, even before the significant levels of underspend were declared at the end of the year.

12.30 pm

It would be easy to say that I will protect myself and the Department of Finance and Personnel by stating that there will be no more spending and that we will ensure that every penny is in place now, or I could tell the Departments that I will ask for money back. I am not prepared to do that because the delivery of services to the community is vital.

We will be able to manage our way through this situation. We have proactively done that already, and we will continue to do so. We will revisit the situation during the December monitoring round, by which time we will have a clearer picture. I stress that it is vital that Departments recognise that we are all in this situation together, and that if there are areas in which money cannot be spent and is unlikely to be spent, it is far better to free up those resources so that we can address shortfalls in areas such as housing where that money can be spent productively and sensibly now.

That is why I decided, even in this constrained situation, to put another £15 million into housing capital. I took the view that although we could hold that money back and keep waiting to see what happens, it is important to keep moving forward and to try to deliver on the objectives of the Programme for Government.

We will continue to monitor the situation, and, as I said, I leave open my offer to the Member to meet officials —

Mr McNarry: What about DRD?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand that the DRD position relates to an internal document on the strategic stocktake. There will always be emerging pressures and reduced requirements within Departments. All Departments' returns will come to DFP. We will examine them all, and we will make decisions on that case. However, as we saw in the present monitoring round, even this year, there were bids worth £137 million. There will always be pressures and easements; it is a question of managing them as we go forward.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his statement, but he has said that £130 million of capital expenditure will not proceed. That is a statement to the construction industry — which is in crisis — that there will be a spending cut of that order, largely in respect of construction projects. The Minister must state, not to me but to that industry, why, instead of expenditure going ahead, as the industry requested, it is being cut to such a degree.

The current stocktake has been described as nothing more than a glorified monitoring round. In view of the huge pressures on the Budget, a few of which the Minister enumerated, such as Workplace 2010, the equal pay issue, the loss of revenue from property sales — and one could mention the property at Crossnacreevy in particular — will he give us a commitment that he will bring a revised annual Budget before the Assembly?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his contribution, but he must understand that there has not been a cut of £130 million in the capital budget. That money has been set aside and proactively managed to deal with the issues that are emerging, in year.

No doubt, the Member would be the first person to criticise me if I were to say that those pressures were emerging, and we had not set anything aside. He would be the first to ask what type of way that is to manage public finances. Of course such matters will have an effect. Next he will say that, if certain Departments — perhaps some Departments are closer to his heart than others — experience reduced requirements, they are, somehow, suffering a cut.

What this is really about, as the Member must understand, is that all Departments, at certain times, experience reduced requirements in certain areas. That is not to say that they will not have increased demands to spend money in other areas. Therefore, there is no cut.

As for the capital investment strategy, I wish to be very clear that the public sector is providing the construction industry with more than 40% of its total turnover in Northern Ireland. For instance, the Department of Health has seven major projects under construction this year, with a total value of £264.6 million. There will be capital spend of £440 million on roads this year. Northern Ireland Water has £127 million available for the Belfast sewers project and £90 million for 10 waste-water treatment projects. Contracts for an additional four schemes, with an aggregated value of £45 million, will be awarded this year.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has projects currently under construction that total £83 million, including South Eastern Regional College, South West College, Northern Regional College, and North West Regional College.

The education and library boards have embarked on a major programme of works with a total value of £120 million. The Department of Education (DE) will, shortly, work on other programmes and PPP projects that are worth £84 million at the contract-award stage.

Let us not allow party-political point-scoring to paint a different picture of the situation. Over the next three years, £925 million will go into housing in order to meet the objectives of creating 10,000 new affordable social houses by 2013, and £5.5 billion will be spent through the investment strategy over those three years.

Mr O'Loan: Perhaps.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member says “perhaps”, but is it not far better to aim for a progressive, ambitious programme than to say that ‘we will spend only £3 million and will keep all the other money back’? I could take a far more cautious approach. I am taking a prudent approach, as are the Executive. Through that, we will try to move ahead as much as we can in order to help to deliver the infrastructure projects that the Departments and the public want, at the same time helping our construction industry. Let us not be senseless about the £130 million that the Member mentioned. It is not a cut; it represents prudent management, given our current situation.

Dr Farry: The Department of Finance and Personnel has committed to giving the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety first call on the £20 million that is available in the monitoring rounds. According to the Minister's statement, it appears that that new money will be phased in, or, in practice, backloaded. Is that not self-defeating for the health budget?

Bearing in mind the existing flexibility that is available to the Minister, as well as the new money in the monitoring rounds, how will we ensure transparency in the manner in which that money will be spent? The public is confused about the situation in which an announcement about free prescriptions is followed a week later by news of cuts — including the possible loss of 700 nursing posts — in front-line services.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The allocations to the health budget are part of the commitments that have been made in the overall Budget process. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already allocated that money in its budget, so the extra money will simply go into that budget. There is no issue, because that Department knows that that money is coming.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible for the announcements that have been made, and Dr Farry and his colleagues should raise those issues — and the question of transparency — with Mr McGimpsey.

Finally, to go back to Mr O'Loan's contribution, I should have made the point that £100 million of the £130 million that he mentioned is coming out of end-year flexibility from previous years. Therefore, it is even less of a concern to him than it would otherwise be.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why £1.5 million was allocated to the new library authority? It is my understanding that the nature of a monitoring round is such that allocations are made on the basis of unforeseen and unanticipated pressures. How could such sudden circumstances have arisen with regard to the new library authority?

In my capacity as a private Member, will the Minister tell me whether he received a bid from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for health and community-care centres? The establishment of several of those centres has been put on hold, including projects that were earmarked in the Western Health and Social Services Board area for Carrickmore and Fintona, which are in County Tyrone.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will answer the Member's second question once I have taken advice on the matter.

To answer his first question, the bid that was made was partly successful. The reason for the request was that the creation of the new library authority will require five redundancies at senior level. Those are inescapable calls on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL).

If that bid were not to proceed, the anticipated savings that would otherwise be made by the establishment of the authority could not be realised. There is a difference between sudden pressures that may or may not emerge and inescapable pressures. It is not a matter of anyone's being taken by surprise; it is just that those pressures have crystallised at this time. There are other issues that we may know about, but when they crystallise is another matter; and they may only come to be decided during an in-year monitoring round.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his sensible approach to public finances. Given the downturn in the property market, why can the Executive not simply borrow more to implement projects to help the construction industry?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are several approaches that could be taken on the financial position. More money could be raised through the regional rate or through increases in manufacturing or business rates. However, the Executive have taken the right decision in those regards by freezing the regional rate over the next three years and capping at 30% the

industrial de-rating for the manufacturing industry as well as business rates.

No one in the Assembly can print money — although I was reminded that there may be some people who may, but not legally. Under the reinvestment and reform initiative, the Executive could seek more borrowing from the Treasury; a substantial amount has already been borrowed under that facility — about £250 million. It would not be wise, in the present circumstances, to increase that, and in so doing meet considerable resistance from the Treasury on public expenditure issues. That is unlikely to be a runner.

Northern Ireland receives a block grant — a finite amount of money. Money could be raised through rates, but that would be at the margins. Therefore, we have to manage the money over the three-year period, recognising that we do not have the resources to accrue new money unless it is given to us through the Treasury. That is one of the reasons underlying the call for a Budget process — despite the decision of the Executive and the Assembly to reject that process this year.

A Budget is decided on when setting out new governmental or Executive priorities. Surely no one is suggesting in the current circumstances that what the Executive are trying to do with the allocations that they have made and with the general thrust of trying to push the economy forward needs to be revisited. What do need to be revisited are the in-year pressures and how those are addressed. If Members are telling me that we need fundamentally to revise the allocations that were agreed in the Programme for Government, they should be upfront in outlining where they propose to cut money and where they propose to put it, because that is the only thing that can be done in a new Budget round. I would love to hear the Members who call for that revision outline where they would like to see more money spent and where they would cut the Budget. If they want a new Budget round, that is what they will have to do.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I support the view that having a fire sale of Government assets would be futile at this time. Will the Minister dispel the media speculation about the bidders coming under common ownership as a result of Workplace 2010 and that it will, therefore, not be necessary to re-advertise that important contract?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question, which, if I may say so, is a very important one.

Since the idea was first mooted and the bidding system set up, the process has taken many twists and turns, including the withdrawal of one bidder. The recent decision to suspend procurement, which I announced at the end of last week, was prompted by a

significant development in the sale process of one of the companies.

12.45 pm

The Member mentioned a fire sale. Given the fact that the cost of borrowing has risen steeply and that there has been a downturn in the property market, it is right to suspend now and take stock again early in 2009. I remain committed to the view that we are on the right lines in trying to obtain a modern estate in which civil servants can work better and deliver a more efficient service to the community.

If the two bidders were to merge, the contract could still be awarded; it is not uncommon to procure through sole-source negotiations. One example of that is the procurement process for the aquatics centre for the London 2012 Olympics. We will carefully consider and assess our position when the intention of both bidders becomes clear.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to the figure of £1.5 million that was allocated to the DOE for flood relief in August. No reference was made to a request from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) regarding flood relief for farmers, who have perhaps suffered more than some householders. Was any request made from that Department?

My colleague Declan O'Loan mentioned the DARD-owned property at Crossnacreevy. Will the Minister confirm whether consideration of the value of that property disrupted his entire thinking on the monitoring round? Will the reduction in value by an estimated £195 million result in an ongoing loss?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The receipts for the sale of the property at Crossnacreevy will not be realised in the current financial year and do not fall within this year's in-year monitoring process. However, it is important to take the matter into account when considering the strategic stocktake. I am sure that the Department of Agriculture will be raising the issue as part of its strategic stocktake, and it would be entirely sensible for it to do so. That is matter for that Department because it came forward with that proposal.

I am delighted that, at the time of the flooding, the Executive were in a position to move quickly to ensure that a payment was made. It was not the purpose of the scheme for that payment to be compensation, but, in August 2008, an immediate payment was made where there was evidence of suffering of severe inconvenience. That payment to councils is an inescapable bid.

I met the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to the monitoring round, and she pressed me on the priority of the allocation to animal health. To date, I have received no business case relating

to flood relief for farmers, and, therefore, I am not in a position to consider a bid sensibly and properly.

Like other Members, I have much sympathy for, and understanding of, the concerns of farmers. However, farmers cannot be compensated by the Executive; just as we cannot compensate householders. I can only respond to the view that a payment should be made if it is pressed on me as a priority ahead of other priorities and if I have a business case on which to make a decision. As yet, no business case has been forthcoming.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his statement. The sum of £1.5 million that has been allocated to enhance the collection of rates arrears compares with a bid from Land and Property Services for £2 million in the June monitoring round. Will that be entirely adequate to meet the backlog in rate collection, which is part of the Minister's potential income?

I also notice that the Minister called for Committees to robustly challenge the expenditure performance of Departments. Will he remind his fellow Ministers of the importance of ensuring that Committees get adequate time to carry out that process, given that that has not been the case for several Committees so far?

Finally, on a technical point, will the Minister ask his staff to examine the figures in table 2 of his statement? It seems that several figures have misplaced decimal points, which suggests that Departments are doing better than they actually are.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Mr Ford's concern about the decimal points has been duly noted. If the figures are wrong, they will be corrected.

The importance of reducing the level of rates arrears as quickly and by as much as possible has been raised in Committee and elsewhere. A certain amount of rates arrears will be accrued every year, because some people, by nature, will not pay as quickly as others. Steps have recently been taken to reduce substantially rates arrears. The extra money allocated will reduce rates arrears even further. It is important that we do that. The money will also fund the reform agenda of Departments.

Like Mr Ford, I am also concerned that Committees do not have sufficient time to challenge Departments' expenditure performance. We must work to ensure that Committees have sufficient time to examine those issues. I know that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has done some work on that. I have pledged the full co-operation of my officials with the Committee on that piece of work.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for his statement. Mr Ford's point about rates arrears collection is a reminder about the importance of rates relief for small businesses. From reports, I understand

that rates relief is available to small businesses in England, Scotland and Wales. Will he comment on, or give an assessment of, the possibility of rates relief for small business in the future?

Finally, the statement makes no mention of roads maintenance, despite the serious deterioration of roads, particularly minor and rural roads, and how that is linked to road safety. What are the Minister's views on that?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question. I was sympathetic to many of the suggested bids. From my statement, the Member will be aware — as Ministers are well aware — that the Departments collectively proposed £137 million worth of bids. All Ministers presented strong arguments for their particular bids. Some arguments were more valid than others, but, nevertheless, they were strongly felt.

However, there came a point when I had to say that if I were to allocate funds to a particular bid, for which there was no surplus money, I would have to remove it from somewhere else. Departments have the flexibility to reallocate money. If a Minister decides that something is of pressing concern and requires higher priority spending, he or she is at liberty to examine reallocations internally within his or her Department.

Forgive me, but I forget what the Member's first question was.

Mr Gallagher: It was about small businesses.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for the reminder. The Member will be aware that that matter is under consideration, along with several other rates relief issues. After consultation with, and consideration by, the Committee, my Department recently announced several decisions on rates relief.

A number of other issues are still to be decided, one of which is rates relief for small businesses. A report has been carried out, and it has raised issues about how effective rates relief would be in helping small businesses, as opposed to just putting money into the hands of landlords. Therefore, the issue needs to be considered. There are other schemes, as the Member said, and we will be considering them carefully.

We must be mindful that every time we do things like this — and there may well be good arguments for doing so — it means less revenue for the Executive and the Assembly to distribute than would otherwise be the case. On the one hand, the Member is calling for more money to be spent on roads maintenance; on the other, he wants us to not raise as much money as we otherwise could through other ways. It is always important to bear in mind that the money that we allocate has to come from somewhere; it does not grow on trees, and we cannot raise the amounts that we need by ourselves. We have a finite, block amount of money, and when we allocate money to one area, that

inevitably has an impact on another area in the public expenditure round.

Mr Poots: Given that the monitoring round deals with unforeseen pressures in spending, has the Minister received any advice from my Ulster Unionist colleague in Lagan Valley? I hope that he does not take too much of that advice if he receives it.

Will the Minister indicate whether the Minister of Agriculture has raised with him the possible £28.5 million disallowance that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development may face following an EU audit into single farm payments? We are all shocked to hear that no bid has been submitted for flood relief when the Committee was informed that that was going to be the case. With respect to extended schools funding, will the Minister tell us where the Department of Education may find the £5 million in its own resources as indicated in his statement?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Agriculture did submit a bid for flood relief. However, when I met the Minister of Agriculture, highest priority among the bids submitted was given to payments to the animal-health sector. There is presently no business case forthcoming; therefore, we are not in a position to make a sensible decision on the matter in this in-quarter monitoring round.

The Member raised another important point — the emerging issue of the potential common agricultural policy disallowance of the single farm payment. My Department will work with the Department of Agriculture to assess the current and future implications of that disallowance. We will advise the Department on the need for a provision, or a contingent liability, for the amount involved. We will assess the financial implications and consult with the Treasury and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the UK position and what assistance they may provide. Now that that issue has emerged, we will offer assistance.

Everyone agrees that the extended schools programme has been extremely useful. I met primary school teachers and head teachers in my constituency recently to discuss that and other issues. I made a point about the Department of Education's budget, which is relevant to other issues floating about regarding the extended schools programme and issues affecting the boards. My reason for saying that the money may have been available is that the Department's resource underspend in 2007-08 was £50 million, some 2.8% of the final allocation, and its resource underspend in 2006-07 was even greater at 4.3%, some £70 million. Past performance indicates that there would be more than sufficient scope for the Department to meet those costs and others as well as emerging pressures.

1.00 pm

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Presumption of Death Bill

Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 16 January 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill (NIA Bill 23/07).

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Presumption of Death Bill completed its Second Stage on Monday 15 September 2008 and was referred to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its Committee Stage. The Bill has 20 clauses and three schedules, and its purpose is to provide a legal framework through which the needs of the families of the disappeared, as well as the families of other missing persons, can be addressed.

My Committee has engaged closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel on the Bill's development and has received oral and written briefings from departmental officials on its provisions. Committee members raised several issues during those briefings, and the Department provided further clarification on those matters.

However, the Committee is aware of some important issues that have not been addressed fully. For example, the Department is working on a new clause that confers on the High Court the power to order someone who is not a party to the proceedings to disclose relevant information to the court. During the Committee's public consultation on the Bill, other issues were raised by the Human Rights Commission and the WAVE Trauma Centre, which acts on behalf of the families of the disappeared. The Committee has sought a formal response from the Department on those issues, and, as a follow-up to the submission from the WAVE Trauma Centre, it has agreed to take oral evidence from family representatives.

The Committee reviewed its heavy work programme for the current session and agreed to give priority to its consideration of the Presumption of Death Bill. Other work pressures on the Committee include: another Bill that is at its Committee Stage; two new, pending Bills; an ongoing inquiry; the Budget stocktake; and the in-depth scrutiny of several policy areas in the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The Committee requires additional time to liaise further with the Department on the issues that have

arisen from the evidence that it received on the Bill, including the proposed new clause on the disclosure of information. Therefore, I seek an extension to the deadline for the Committee Stage to 16 January 2009 so that the Committee has sufficient time to reach a considered position and report on the Bill to the Assembly. That revised timetable has been agreed with the Department. The Committee aims to conclude its deliberations and report to the Assembly as soon as possible in advance of that deadline. I ask Members to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

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 16 January 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill (NIA Bill 23/07).

Civil Registration Bill

Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 March 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Civil Registration Bill (NIA Bill 20/07).

The Civil Registration Bill is the other Bill that has reached Committee Stage and that the Committee for Finance and Personnel is considering. The Bill comprises 31 clauses and two schedules, and it will provide a more flexible legislative framework for the civil registration of vital events, including births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships. It aims to provide improved service delivery, better access to services and information, as well as introducing new and more responsive services.

The Committee engaged closely with the Department on the Bill's provisions and received written evidence from stakeholders, including the Council of Irish Genealogical Organisations, the Association of Professional Genealogists in Ireland, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Committee will wish to follow up with the Department issues that arise from that written evidence. It may also require oral evidence. Moreover, the Committee has already indicated its intention to examine various measures and safeguards that will be required as a result of provisions in the Bill in order to protect the public from the risks of data disclosure and fraud.

I have already explained that, given the Committee's considerable work pressures at present, it has had to prioritise its business. Following consultation with the Department, it was agreed that the Presumption of Death Bill would be given priority over the Civil Registration Bill. Therefore, I seek an extension of the deadline for the Committee Stage to 20 March 2009, to allow the Committee sufficient time to reach a considered position and to report on the Bill to the Assembly. That revised timetable has also been agreed with the Department. The Committee will endeavour to conclude its work on the Bill in advance of that deadline. That will depend on the progress that can be made on other business that is before the Committee and on any unforeseen pressures on its work programme. I ask Members to support the motion.

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 20 March 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Civil Registration Bill (NIA Bill 20/07).

Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill

Extension of Committee Stage

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

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 5 December 2008, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 21/07).

The Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill passed its Second Stage on 1 July 2008 and was referred to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 2 July 2008. The Bill is a major piece of legislation that contains 35 clauses and seven schedules. It deals with the reorganisation and restructuring of the health and social care reform system. The Bill's stated purpose is to provide the legislative framework in which the proposed new health and social care structures will operate.

Prior to the Bill's introduction, the Committee heard evidence from several key organisations that are likely to be affected by its provisions. Following its introduction, 30 organisations responded to the Committee's requests for written evidence during the summer recess. The Committee has taken further evidence from key organisations and is now undertaking its formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. It is conscious that the Department aims to have proposed changes in place by 1 April 2009. It recognises that that will be a tight timescale. The Committee is also mindful that proposals to restructure the health and social care system have been under discussion for some time; previously, by direct rule Ministers, and, at present, by the Health Minister.

I know that the lengthy period of uncertainty has caused great anxiety and concern for many of those who will be affected by the proposed changes. Therefore, the Committee aims to complete the Committee Stage as quickly as possible, while, at the same time, giving due consideration to the detail of the proposals. That process is nearing completion. I therefore seek a short extension of the deadline to 5 December 2008 in order to allow sufficient time for the Committee to complete its consideration of the views that have been expressed and to compile its report on the Bill. I ask Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 5 December 2008, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 21/07).

Report of the Committee on Procedures on its Inquiry into Private Legislation

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 the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on its inquiry into Private Legislation.

The Committee on Procedure's second report of the current mandate examines how the Assembly should deal with private Bills. On behalf of the Committee, I ask the Assembly to approve the report on private legislation.

Private legislation should not be confused with a private Member's Bill. A private Bill's purpose is to obtain particular powers for an individual, corporate body or association of persons. It seeks exemptions or benefits in excess of, or in conflict with, general law, and it can relate to the estate, property, status, style or otherwise of the promoter's personal affairs.

In the main, private Bills are likely to concern: the legislative arrangements for charities, colleges and churches; powers sought by local authorities; and general company law. Private Bills often seek exemptions from, or additional powers to, public law: in 2007, for example, the National Trust introduced to Westminster a private Bill related to its governance structures in Northern Ireland. Had the Assembly been restored at that stage, the Bill would have come before it.

Although private Bills are not routine in other legislatures, they are not uncommon, and a private Bill will probably be introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly sooner rather than later. However, research suggests that it is unlikely that any more than four, or at the most five, private Bills per mandate — if even that many — will be introduced to the Assembly. With that in mind, the Committee on Procedures recently conducted an inquiry into private Bills and today seeks the Assembly's approval of the resulting report. If approved, the aim is to produce Standing Orders to govern the progress of such Bills through the Assembly.

I will not attempt to cover all of the report's 26 recommendations in detail. Other legislatures informed the Committee that elected Members may first become aware of a private Bill only when it is introduced. Therefore, the Committee on Procedures recommends that, before a private Bill is introduced to the Assembly, it should undergo a preliminary scrutiny to ensure that it is appropriate. In other words, the person or body that

promotes the Bill must prove that it is required, that no alternative means of meeting that requirement exists, and that it concerns a matter on which it is appropriate for the Assembly to legislate. The promoter of the Bill must also prove that appropriate consultation has taken place with those affected by the Bill and that all relevant documentation has been provided to the Assembly.

When the promoter has provided such proof, the Speaker will introduce the Bill by announcing that it has been received and will be published, and that a private Bill Committee will be established. The Committee on Procedures recommends a period of 60 days between the introduction of the Bill and the debate at Second Stage. That may seem excessive, but considerable work must be done between those stages. Those who would be adversely affected by the Bill have the right to lodge an objection and have 42 days in which to do so. The private Bill Committee will assess the objections and agree on whether they are valid.

Unlike public Bills from the Executive, private Members or Committees, the provisions of a private Bill will probably be completely new to all MLAs. Therefore, the private Bill Committee will be asked to produce a report on its principles to assist the Assembly during the debate at Second Stage. The Assembly will vote on the principles of the Bill at Second Stage, and it will either pass or fall. If the Assembly approves the principles, the Bill will be referred to the private Bill Committee for its Committee Stage.

The Committee on Procedures recommends that a private Bill Committee comprising five members is created each time a private Bill is introduced. That template is similar to a private Bill Committee in the Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament. In keeping with tried and tested procedures and processes in those jurisdictions, the Committee recommends the introduction of a specialist role for private Bill Committees in the Assembly.

1.15 pm

A private Bill is different from a public Bill, which covers policy and addresses issues that affect a large number of people. A private Bill affects a small number of people on a personal and direct level, and that is at the heart of why a private Bill Committee will behave differently to a public Bill Committee.

Based on examples from other legislatures, objectors to private Bills are, normally, ordinary individuals rather than the lobby groups or interest groups that give evidence to Statutory Committees during the Committee Stage of a public Bill. Those individuals object to the Bill because it directly and adversely affects them. The Bill may affect their property or cause the loss of an amenity or an increase in noise levels.

The objectors can present their case to the private Bill Committee. Furthermore, they can bring witnesses

to support their case and hire legal counsel to present the evidence. The promoters of the Bill will have the same privileges, and, after both presentations, the objector can cross-examine the promoter, and vice versa. Thereafter, the Bill Committee will decide which side to support.

Another major difference is that the private Bill Committee can make amendments to a Bill rather than going to the Assembly for approval. The reasons for that policy are outlined on page 16 of the report. If a Statutory Committee wants to make an amendment to a Bill, the Minister and Committee members debate it in the Chamber. The Committee argues for the amendment, and the Minister has ample opportunity to defend his or her position. Based on that debate, Members vote for or against the amendment. That process is not available to the promoter of or objector to a private Bill. Those persons must outline the argument to the private Bill Committee, and only members of that Committee will have the opportunity to hear both sides directly. Therefore, the private Bill Committee is best placed to make a decision on amendments.

However, MLAs will have an opportunity to table amendments to the Bill during the Consideration Stage. The Committee on Procedures recommends that there be a minimum of five working days between the Committee Stage and Consideration Stage. During that time, any Member can table an amendment under the normal rules for tabling amendments to public Bills. The debate on the private Bill at Consideration Stage will follow existing procedures on public Bills. However, if there are a substantial number of amendments, or they are of a technical or substantive nature, the Bill can be referred back to the private Bill Committee. Again, that provision arises because of the personal nature of private Bills and because they affect a small number of individuals personally and directly.

The promoter and objector must be allowed an opportunity to declare that an amendment tabled by a Member may disadvantage them. Moreover, an amendment tabled by a Member may affect a new group of objectors who, therefore, must be allowed to present their case. The Committee on Procedures recommends that the Further Consideration Stage follow existing procedures except that technical or corrective amendments only are allowed. Final Stage, Consideration Stage and Royal Assent for private Bills will follow current procedures.

The report recommends that private Bills are not subject to Standing Orders on accelerated passage. All other legislatures charge a fee for private Bills, and the Committee on Procedures believes that it is reasonable for the Assembly Commission to do so. The Committee has consulted the Assembly Commission and agreed that the fee for promoters — which can be reduced by 75% for charitable-type bodies — will be £5,000.

The fee that is recommended for lodging an objection is £20. That is not enough to cover administrative costs, but it should —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Lord Morrow: However, setting the fee at £20 should deter frivolous objections. The Committee on Procedures recognises that a fee of £20 may represent a substantial amount for retired people or those on benefits, so it has agreed that objectors can band to submit a single objection.

I recognise that my time has elapsed; however, other points still need to be made. Perhaps I will get a chance to make them when Members ask questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mickey Brady.

Mr Brady: It is Mr Brolly who is speaking in this debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Francie Brolly.

Mr Brolly: Mickey cannot read.

Go raibh míle maith agat. The passage of private legislation is unlikely to cause Members to spend long days and late nights in the House. Rather, it will occur rarely, if at all. Nevertheless, it is important that procedures are in place to deal with it. I commend the work of the Committee on Procedures and its staff to produce a framework within which private legislation may be processed and advanced. I ask the House to approve the report.

Private legislation will have limited impact on the general legislative estate. However, the issues that promoters of private Bills submit to the House will be important and, in some cases, vital to those promoters. Therefore, it is important and commendable that the Committee on Procedures has been meticulous in the preparation and presentation of its report. The preliminary scrutiny, under the leadership of an Assembly official, to be known as the examiner of private Bills, is a useful safeguard against the waste of Member and staff time on proposals that are insufficiently significant, frivolous or have no prospect of approval. The promoters' fee of £5,000 may also act as a deterrent in some such cases.

I ask the House to approve the report.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Clerk to the Committee on Procedures and her staff for the huge amount of work that they put into the report. I also thank the Chairman, who has precisely outlined the fairly complicated issue of private Bills.

The Committee researched and compared practice in other UK legislatures and in the Dáil. The Assembly's opinion was sought on the recommendations, particularly on the subject of fees. I am pleased that the Committee took into account the Assembly Commission's view, especially on a reduction in the fee for charitable

organisations. Committee members were keen to facilitate objectors, and, in recommendation 21, the fee for objection has been set at only £20.

This type of legislation is not frequently enacted. As the Chairman of the Committee on Procedures said, in 2007, the National Trust introduced at Westminster a private Bill that related to its governance structures in Northern Ireland.

The legislative stages for private Bills are set out clearly. In keeping with the experience of other legislatures, a raft of private Bills is not anticipated. The report merely recommends provision of procedures that exist in other elected institutions. We have taken advice from a wide range of relevant sources. The Committee is strongly of the view that preliminary scrutiny is vital before introduction of a Bill to the Assembly; and it believes that the promoter of the Bill should meet the necessary criteria. Any private legislation should meet all the normal standards that Executive legislation must meet. Private legislation should go through all the procedures that apply to all other legislation.

The Committee has also drawn up criteria for objections to Bills. I support the report that is before the Assembly.

Lord Browne: As a member of the Committee on Procedures, I also thank all of the Committee staff for their commitment and patience during the inquiry, which commenced in May 2007. As part of its research, the Committee arranged visits to the Scottish Parliament, Westminster and the Dáil. I was privileged to visit those legislatures along with the other Committee members.

From the evidence received, I concur with the Committee's recommendation that the Stages of a private Bill should reflect those that are in place for public Bills in this Assembly. Those include preliminary scrutiny; followed by introduction, which is the First Stage; then the Second Stage; Committee Stage; Consideration Stage; Further Consideration Stage; and the Final Stage. Pre-introductory scrutiny is normal for public Bills, and it would be wise to have a similar stage for private Bills. To do otherwise could mean that Members might only become aware of a private Bill when it was introduced. As stated in the report, evidence from the Scottish Parliament suggests that preliminary scrutiny can smooth the passage of Bills.

I do not intend to through each proposed Stage that the report details, but it is worth highlighting some of the recommendations. One of those recommendations was that, at Committee Stage — in line with Westminster and the Scottish Parliament — the promoters and objectors should be allowed to call witnesses and cross-examine each other under the direction of the Committee. They should also be allowed legal representation when presenting their cases to the Committee.

The Committee gave detailed thought to the issues of cross-examination and legal representation, particularly concerning the management of the private Bill Committee and the matter of equality of arms for objectors who may not be able to afford legal representation. That is an issue that may require further consideration.

However, it is also worth noting that the Committee did not make any recommendation about the involvement of the Assembly's Legal Services in the cross-examination process. The Committee left it to the discretion of the private Bill Committee to decide whether — based on the specifics of the private Bill — the promoters and objectors can undertake the cross-examination under the direction of the Chairperson, or whether that is better done with the assistance of Legal Services.

Another recommendation is that a private Bill should be introduced via an announcement from the Speaker that a private Bill has been received and will be published. A further recommendation was that there should be a minimum of 60 working days between a Bill's First and Second Stage. My noble friend Lord Morrow has already said that the National Trust introduced a private Bill in Westminster in 2007 that was related to its governance structures in Northern Ireland. I am sure that all Members of this House wish that all such private Bills could be dealt with by this Assembly in future.

The report puts a robust process in place, with an effective and efficient set of procedures that will enable private legislation to come before this House. I therefore support the motion.

Mr Storey: At the outset, I concur with the other Members of the House who have congratulated the staff of the Procedures Committee in appreciation of work that they carried out.

The procedures for private Bills are not the most stimulating or interesting of topics. However, people outside this Chamber will appreciate the discussion of any legislation, let alone legislation that comes from the normal legislative process.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

1.30 pm

Nevertheless, the Assembly is a legislature, and it should have proper procedures in place to enable private Bills to be introduced. That is the aim of the Committee's report, which provides a working policy for private Bills, and which, if agreed by the Assembly, will enable the Committee to begin drafting the appropriate Standing Orders.

When undertaking its inquiry, the Committee on Procedures visited the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the Irish Parliament, as Lord Browne mentioned. We spoke to Members and officials from

those legislatures about the operation of private Bills, which was a great help to all members of the Committee. Private Bills and the procedures relating to them are not easy to get a grip of but, on behalf of the Committee, I thank those who gave their time and advice to assist us with the inquiry — it certainly made the Committee's task much easier.

In developing the procedures that the Committee is recommending to the Assembly, we tried as much as possible to follow those that are currently in place for public Bills. However, because of the special nature of private Bills, that was not always possible. That is particularly evident in respect of the procedures recommended for private Bill Committees, which are very different from the Standing Committee procedures in the Assembly, but there are good reasons for that. A few examples of private Bills from other legislatures may help to illustrate that point.

In the Scottish Parliament, for example, several Bills have been promoted by the private-transport companies for light-rail links. One such Bill involved a small number of local people who objected, either because part of their garden was being vested or because they were going to be subject to additional noise in their homes or business from the operation of the transport scheme. The private Bill Committee had to listen to parties on both sides and decide which argument was the most reasonable.

During the clause-by-clause examination of the Bill, the Committee was then able to decide whether amendments were necessary. The amendments were technical because the Bill was, by its nature, very technical. The Bill was factual and detailed provisions such as the number of square feet that would be taken from Mr and Mrs Smith's garden. The amendment, therefore, had to be just as factual. The private Bill Committee's decision that the rail line would be moved 3 ft away from Mr and Mrs Smith's land subsequently affected someone else. That Bill, and other similar Bills in Scotland, took up to two years to be passed. Members will be glad to know that such Bills are unlikely here in Northern Ireland.

An example from Westminster concerned four local councils that were seeking additional powers to control peddlers and street traders. An example from the Irish Parliament involved Trinity College seeking to change its governance arrangements. Trinity College was founded by a charter, which had to be changed using a private Bill. There was a substantial number of objections to that private Bill, which gave the Government more management control, and the Bill took almost 18 months to complete its passage. Everyone employed by Trinity was entitled to object and a substantial number of people did so. The private Bill Committee had to listen to all the objections and make a decision that came down on one side.

Such examples provide some indication of the wide range of subjects covered by private Bills. The procedures recommended in the report mirror those used by the House of Commons, the Lords, the Scottish Parliament and the Irish Parliament, and are designed to meet the usual needs of private Bills. The procedures have not simply been plucked out of the air but are based on good practice elsewhere, as well as the unique character of private Bills. By their very nature, private Bill Committees have a quasi-judicial nature, because they adjudicate between competing private and/or personal needs. A private Bill Committee will, therefore, behave very differently from any other Committee that considers a Bill.

That said, a large number of private Bills receive no objections and can complete their passage in a matter of months. Our Committee report includes recommendations about how private Bill Committees would operate when no objections have been received.

Furthermore, the circumstances in which Members should be allowed to serve on a private Bill Committee are important, because Members must protect themselves from possible accusations of looking after their own interests at the expense of other people's interests. The procedures recommended by the Committee are based on the model outlined in rule 9A.5 of the Scottish Parliament's Standing Orders.

Private Bills deal with Members' personal concerns, and therefore, Members who serve on a private Bill Committee must be impartial and neutral, which is different from their normal political advocate's role. The example of land vesting by transport companies in Scotland, which I quoted earlier, illustrates that fact.

Mr Brolly and Mr Neeson referred to fees, and the Committee on Procedures discussed that matter for a considerable time. The Committee concluded that it is appropriate to charge fees. Unlike public legislation, private Bills affect a relatively small number of people. In fact, such Bills afford extra powers, or exemptions from existing laws, to individuals, companies and organisations. Therefore, it is inappropriate to fund such legislation from the public purse.

The promoters of private Bills will be expected to pay drafting costs and a fee towards the Assembly's administration costs. The report recommends a fee of £5,000 plus associated costs, such as the printing of a Bill. Having discussed the issue with other legislators, the Committee discovered that it is unlikely that that fee would cover the Assembly's administrative costs. However, drafting a Bill — for which a promoter would have to pay — can cost more than £40,000, so the Committee considered it inappropriate to ask for more money, particularly, as Mr Neeson said, because such costs might prevent charities and smaller organisations from introducing private Bills. For charitable organisations

that might find it difficult to pay even a £5,000 fee, the Committee recommends that the fee be reduced by 75% to £1,250.

The recommended fee payable by objectors to a private Bill is £20. That caused considerable discussion in the Committee, because members do not wish to disadvantage anyone or make it difficult to object. Nevertheless, frivolous objectors must be deterred. Other legislatures' experience demonstrates that some people object simply for the sake of objecting and not because they are in any way disadvantaged. Objections should be received only from those who have a clear and direct interest in a Bill. In order to address concerns that people might be unfairly disadvantaged by the fee, the Committee recommends that a single fee should be allowed to cover several objectors.

The Committee on Procedures recommends that the stages for introducing private Bills follow those in place for public Bills. We do not expect many private Bills to be introduced; however, familiarity with the stages that existing Bills undergo will assist us in smoothing the passage of what we hope will be rarely used procedures.

Nevertheless, some procedural differences are required to make the process work. For example, preliminary scrutiny is necessary. It would be unusual to introduce a public Bill without prior warning; however, that is not the case for private Bills. In other legislatures, private Bills are often introduced with no warning, and, therefore, preliminary scrutiny ensures that several prerequisites are in place: the Bill must be appropriate; all documentation must be completed; the fee must be paid; the Bill must meet the requirements stipulated in Standing Orders; and, most importantly, proper and full consultation must have been undertaken. The Committee recommends that private Bills should not be introduced until promoters have proven that the aforementioned points have been satisfied. After introduction, given the likelihood that most Members will know little —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: I recommend the report to the Assembly, and I trust that the House will support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on its inquiry into Private Legislation.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

The Disappeared

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they have a duty to behave responsibly so as to ensure that nothing that they say will prejudice any future proceedings that may be taken in relation to these matters. Considering the nature of the motion, it is important that, as far as possible, Members do not stray outside the motion or the business of the House.

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 D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the suffering of families of the disappeared; believes that there has not been full disclosure on this issue; and calls on any individual or organisation with information which may lead to the remains of the disappeared being returned to their loved ones for dignified burial, to bring forward that information without any further delay.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for affording the House the time to debate this important issue.

There are many things that I could say, and which I would like to say, during the debate, but, in deference to the wishes of the families of the disappeared — some of whom are here today — it might be better that they remain unsaid. I have spoken to the families, and I will be guided in what I say by their wishes and desires for the debate. As you did, Mr Speaker, I ask other Members to also be so guided. The wishes and desires of the families are that this motion and debate will focus attention on their plight and help open the hearts and minds which are still closed to their pain to divulge important information that has not been forthcoming. Such information will aid the process of the recovery of the remains of their loved ones.

Throughout the history of what we call the Troubles, many individuals have been killed, and many families and communities have struggled with the aftermath. The overwhelming majority of families have had the consolation of waking and burying their dead in accordance with the rights of the faith within which they were raised. Although those ceremonies may not have wiped away every tear, they provided the possibility of closure on the grief, sorrow and pain of the traumatic death of a loved one. The families of the disappeared who have not yet had the remains of their loved ones returned to them have not had even that possibility opened to them. They have been left — in many cases for decades — pondering the whys and wherefores of their loved ones' disappearance, wondering about their

fate, arriving at their own conclusions and awaiting the recovery of their remains.

The words of Seán O'Casey's famous poem 'A Rare Time for Death in Ireland', which was written over 80 years ago, are strangely prophetic of the disappeared:

"You will be unknown for ever
You died without a word of praise
You will be buried without even a shadowy ceremony
No bugle will call your name
No gunshot will let loose brave echoes over your grave
You will not be numbered among the accepted slain."

Those of us who have experienced deep sorrow at the death of a loved one can never imagine the anguish that the families of the disappeared have had to endure over the years. In our sad situations we have been enwrapped in the support and concern of our communities. In some areas, however, the community from which people have disappeared has been silenced by the *omertà*: whatever you say, say nothing.

In the end, it has been left to the families to speak for their loved ones, and I hope that what Members have to say today will add to their voices in the same dignified way in which they have spoken.

1.45 pm

We can but stand back and admire the families' endurance, patience and great dignity in the face of prolonged anguish. They are not, as they are entitled, asking for even justice or retribution; they are asking only to be able to bury their loved ones with dignity. Surely that is not too much to ask in a civilised, Christian country.

Those who, quite rightly, demand justice, equality, human rights and the truth about the past must ensure that they, too, afford the same rights to others who yearn for them. Now is the time for those who have said nothing, or who have not said enough, to speak and come forward with vital information. The families of the disappeared ask all of us in public life — including Members of the House — to assist them in several ways. Where they can, they should publicise the mechanisms by which information can be given to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. Mr Speaker, the commission's confidential telephone number, which I hope that you will permit me to read into the record, is 00800 55585500, and its address is ICLVR, PO Box 10827, Dublin 2.

The families have told me that we can also help by reinforcing in all publicity on the disappeared that any information given to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains is privileged and can be used only for the recovery of the bodies of the disappeared, and cannot be passed on to any other agency or authority.

The commission has a team of forensic experts working on its behalf, and that new methodology, which it is hoped

will prove effective, can work only with information. Any information, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem, could be the key to the recovery of remains. The commissioners and the forensic team are halfway through their timetable of work. If, at the end of their tenure, bodies have still not been recovered, there is an onus on the British and Irish Governments to continue to support the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. The families ask all of us in public life to support the continuation of the commission.

I use, as I am entitled to, the platform that this debate allows in order to appeal to anyone, including Members of the House, who has any influence over those who were involved in the actions that led to the disappearances to redouble their efforts, to return to their sources, and to help to ensure that no effort is spared to bring closure to the families. Likewise, I ask anyone who may have information, to use the mechanisms already outlined, or any other channel with which they feel comfortable, in order to convey that information to the commission. The families have waited long enough; they deserve closure. Let us do all in our power in order to help them.

The remains of Seamus Wright, Kevin McKee, Columba McVeigh, Brendan Megraw and Danny McIlhone have not been returned to their families. Charles Armstrong and Gerard Evans, both from Crossmaglen, disappeared in County Armagh. No one has admitted responsibility for their disappearance, and their remains have not been returned to their families. The remains of Seamus Ruddy, who was killed by the INLA, have not been returned to his family.

Robert Nairac, a member of the SAS, also disappeared in County Armagh, and his remains have not been located. Legal proceedings are ongoing in that case.

The disappearance of Lisa Dorrian from Ballyhalbert in 2005 may have had loyalist links. Her family still await the return of her remains.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that you share my hope that today's debate will move and change hearts and minds so that the information necessary for the return of the remains of the families of the disappeared will be forthcoming.

Agus arís eile, a Cheann Comhairle, gabhaim buíochas leat as an deis a thabhairt domh inniu cáis na dteaghlach a chur os comhair an Tí agus os comhair an tsaoil.

Mr Speaker, I thank you again for affording me the opportunity today to highlight the plight of the families of the disappeared. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCausland: I support the motion, and I urge those with any relevant information to bring it forward as swiftly as possible so that the bodies of those known as the disappeared can be returned to their families for burial. I agree with Dominic Bradley that it is important that we maintain the right tone in this debate.

The story of the disappeared started in west Belfast, on 2 October 1972, with the disappearance of Kevin McKee and Seamus Wright and their subsequent murders. They were both republicans from west Belfast, but they were accused by the IRA of being informers and were murdered by the IRA. The next murder happened in December of that year, and that time the victim was Jean McConville, a widow and the mother of 10 children. She was taken from Divis Flats by the IRA and shot dead.

Up until 1972, the IRA had a policy of shooting suspected informers and leaving their bodies by the roadside as a public warning to others who might be tempted down the same path. However, in 1972, that policy changed, and there is one man in this Assembly who knows only too well how that came about — the Member for West Belfast Gerry Adams.

Adams had joined the IRA in 1966, and he went with the Provisionals in 1970. The following year he was the IRA commander in Ballymurphy, and he became second in command in the Belfast brigade staff. Then, in 1972, he became the Belfast commander. As such, he was in command of the IRA when McKee, Wright and Jean McConville were murdered. In the wake of the Four Square Laundry affair, Adams set up two secret IRA units, each comprising four members; one was based in west Belfast and the other in north Belfast. Their role was to carry out special tasks, such as the murder of suspected informers and the disposal of their bodies. The fact is that, apart from Captain Robert Nairac and Lisa Dorrian, all of the disappeared were members of the nationalist and republican community, and with one exception, they were murdered by the IRA.

At a recent conference in Carlingford to mark the fortieth anniversary of the civil rights movement, the former Stormont MP Austin Currie spoke of an elderly mother who went to her grave mourning her son, who was one of the disappeared. Austin Currie described the murders and the disposal of the bodies as the worst violation of human rights during the Troubles. That is why some of us find Sinn Féin's support for human rights somewhat hypocritical — republicans have been guilty of some of the most appalling human rights abuses in the history of this country.

A daughter of Jean McConville said of Gerry Adams:

"It was common knowledge in our area he was an IRA leader at the time. When he came to my house, he went to the bathroom for about 15 minutes the moment he arrived and when he came out he insisted that he had nothing to do with my mother's disappearance. But he couldn't look me in the eye and I just didn't believe him."

She did not believe him, and neither do I. Of course, Gerry Adams has always sought to distance himself from the whole gruesome episode, but the fact is that we do not believe him.

More than 3,600 people died during the Troubles, and almost half died at the hands of the IRA. The violence is over, and for that we are glad, but is it not time for Adams to show some remorse for those crimes? Is it not time that he showed some remorse for the evil that was inflicted on so many families by the organisation that he commanded?

On 25 September, Gerry Adams called for the setting up of an independent international truth commission on the Troubles. He said that he wanted the truth, so perhaps he will tell us today what he knows about the disappeared. Perhaps he will tell us what he knows about the perpetrators of those crimes. Those people know where the bodies are buried, and only their information can lead to the bodies of the disappeared being brought home for a proper burial.

I hope that the motion will not be passed simply as a formality. Rather, I hope that it will yield some results and that some people, particularly the Member for West Belfast, will do what they can and tell us what they know so that movement can be made in that direction.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I had hoped that you would intervene —

Mr McCausland: I have finished my speech.

Mr O'Dowd: Given your ruling at the start of the debate, I had hoped that you would intervene on the Member's speech. Some of the Member's comments are unhelpful and not in keeping with the tone in which the debate was set.

Mr Speaker: I said at the beginning of the debate — and I am mindful of this fact — that this is a very sensitive matter, and it is important that Members from all sides of the House act responsibly. Mr Adams is the next Member to speak, and I am sure that he will answer any allegations that need to be answered.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an méid a dúirt an fear amaideach sin. Ba mhaith liom a rá an-soiléir go raibh sé mícheart sna rudaí a dúirt sé. Tá mé ag caint i bhfabhar an ruin seo, agus aontaím gur rud millteanach brónach é clann gan uaigh acu le cuairt a thabhairt uirthi ná le paidir a rá ag a taobh.

Before speaking in support of the motion, I deny and refute the assertions that were made by the Member for North Belfast. I commend and support all the families who have suffered a grievous injustice and who have campaigned with dignity for many years to locate the remains of their loved ones. I welcome those people to the Public Gallery. Once again, I acknowledge the grave injustice inflicted upon those families, and I express my deep regret about that. I thank everyone who has worked to help the families, including the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, An Garda Síochána, and all the experts and

staff who provided assistance. Those people deserve our full support.

For its part, the IRA has apologised for the grief that it has caused; it has acknowledged that its intention in working closely with the special forensic investigating team has been to rectify that injustice; and it has accepted full responsibility for its actions. I know that that is of little consolation to the families who are involved. Those families want and deserve a Christian burial for their loved ones. I also believe that the IRA has provided a full disclosure of all the information that is available to it and that republicans continue to work diligently on this important and heartbreaking issue. That fact was recognised some time ago by Geoff Knupfer, the forensic science investigative consultant who works for the independent commission. He said:

“in a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation they are trying to help in every way they can. I am absolutely convinced that they are doing everything they can to assist. The support we have had from them has been absolutely 100% from day one.”

I make it clear, a Cheann Comhairle, that none of that minimises the IRA's responsibility for the suffering endured by those families. Mr Knupfer also acknowledged the incredible difficulties and challenges facing the search teams. He stated:

“I think that probably in some cases...the people directly involved have died. If you're reviewing events that took place 30 years ago, then memories do fade and locations change and that's one of the things we have identified pretty rapidly — that sites have changed dramatically.”

Despite that, a Cheann Comhairle, let me make it very clear that it is imperative that efforts to find those remains continue. Such efforts must also continue in cases in which the IRA has said that it is not involved. The disappearances of Seamus Ruddy, Charlie Armstrong and Gerard Evans are a source of as much trauma and grief for their families as that endured by other families.

The suffering of those families has gone on for too long. They have a fundamental right to bury their loved ones, and there is an onus on those responsible to help bring that about.

2.00 pm

It was stated earlier in the debate that the remains of four people have been found. However, the bodies of Seamus Wright, Kevin McKee, Columba McVeigh, Brendan McGraw and Danny McIlhone remain missing. Contrary to suggestions that have been made by some Members, there must be no doubt that republicans continue to work to ensure that the families of those men can give them Christian burials as soon as possible. I assure those families that, even as I speak, republicans continue to work towards that. They do so by visiting sites, meeting regularly with the experts involved in the searches, and doing everything possible in order to bring closure to the families involved. I also offer an

opinion that is based on work already done — the locations identified by republicans contain the burial sites.

Finally, I repeat my call to anyone with any information to bring it forward. Sin é, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome this very solemn debate. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion. The issue before Members is serious. The aftermath of any terrorist war involves a search for many victims of the conflict, not least for the families of those victims who have become known as the disappeared. That is an important part of the healing process after a conflict. It is not an issue that can be brushed under the carpet as inconvenient or uncomfortable for the current political set-up. On the grounds of human dignity and human decency, it must be addressed.

The depth of suffering for many families of the disappeared cannot and must not be airbrushed out of history. It is very real, and the hearts of Ulster Unionists go out to those families who have been deprived of even the most basic human right — being able to grieve properly for their loved ones. The callousness of those murders was bad enough, but to compound that with a failure to surrender their bodies for burial adds insult to injury.

It is important for Members to issue a clear and unequivocal call, as representatives of a democratic process embedded in human rights and freedom, for every individual and every organisation who can contribute to resolving the issue of the disappeared to bring forward the necessary information without any further delay. Structures to enable that to happen have been in place since August 2006, when the British and Irish Governments agreed to a series of key measures to ease, and to make more accessible, the process of providing information.

Those measures included the retention of experts and the establishment of a project team to work as part of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains in order to develop the commission's recommendations. Confidential telephone lines were created and widely advertised in order to enable people to share information on the whereabouts of the bodies of the disappeared with the commission. Where beneficial, other experts and resources have been added to the measures available to the commission, including the collection of DNA samples from the closest biological relatives of those whose bodies have yet to be recovered. Medical and dental records are also available.

The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains was established in 1999 by treaty between the United Kingdom Government and the Government of Ireland. Such measures are welcome, but, frankly, they have proven to be insufficient.

Frank Murray is an independent commissioner, as is Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, who said:

“Everything that can be done is being done to locate the bodies of the Disappeared.

Every possible lead and fresh piece of information is being investigated and areas, often of bogland or other difficult terrain, surveyed by a dedicated team who are committed to doing all that they can to bring closure to the families and find the remains of their loved ones.”

Therefore, efforts are being made, but they must be supported. The energy and commitment of former terrorists and their political representatives have been questioned by the relatives of some of the disappeared. Therefore, I call on Sinn Féin to respond specifically to that matter. Recently, Sinn Féin representatives have made many comments on the importance of other parties in the Executive adopting a proper attitude towards them, but if Sinn Féin were to address the issue —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Kennedy: If Sinn Féin representatives were to address the issue of the disappeared in a more effective and committed way, it would help in some small way to improve how those parties perceive them.

Dr Farry: I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing the matter to the Assembly. The situation with respect to the disappeared is one of the most frightening and troubling aspects of Northern Ireland's history during the past four decades. As other Members have stated, people must reflect on, and never forget, the degree of suffering that has been experienced by the families because of the brutality of the murders and the failure to bring closure.

It is extremely troubling for people when they cannot bury someone whom they know in their hearts they have lost. Indeed, the mother of Columba McVeigh went to her grave last year without getting closure. I spoke to her several years ago, and, to her dying day, she retained the hope that her son's remains would be returned to her. She was unable to move on with her life during the 30-year gap between his disappearance and her death, and that is extremely sad.

When we talk about dealing with the past — and I hope that this is something that the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past will consider — we must bear in the mind that the disappeared must be very much to the forefront of efforts to bring closure to the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

The Assembly can deal with the matter of death certificates, and it is important to note that the individuals whose remains have not yet been recovered have not been formally declared dead because of the absence of those remains. Hopefully, the Presumption of Death Bill will address that situation. However, that is only one aspect of bringing closure on this important issue.

The most crucial aspect is the recovery of the remains so that the victims can be given a proper burial.

I note with interest and encouragement the IRA apology and the words that have been said by Mr Adams from Sinn Féin, but I would like those words to be extended to try to deal with that for which the IRA was responsible in our society. However, a start has been made in that respect.

It has been nine years since the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains was established, and, aside from two sets of remains that were found in 1999 — one set of which were handed over in a coffin — progress has been sparing. One must ask why there has been a delay during those nine years.

If the co-operation is there and is as fulsome as has been described, I would like to think that we will see much more progress than we have seen to date.

We must reflect extremely seriously on the situation with Jean McConville — the travesty of the searches finding no remains and the body being recovered several years later.

I wish to take this opportunity to reflect also on the situation that relates to one of my former constituents, Lisa Dorrian from Conlig, who has been missing for more than three years. That case reminds us again that the problems of the disappeared are not merely a legacy of the 1970s and early 1980s; they are very much alive in recent memory. There are people who know what happened to Lisa Dorrian. Hopefully, their consciences will eventually be pricked, and they will come forward with the information to give members of her family the closure that they seek. I praise the work that is being done by Lisa Dorrian's family and others to keep her case very much alive. However, there is always a danger, as time goes on, that such cases fade from memory. The message going out from today's debate is that we should keep the memory of all the disappeared very much alive and to the forefront of people's minds.

I note with some concern that the remit of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains extends only until 1998 and, therefore, does not include the case of Lisa Dorrian. Perhaps that matter should be considered by the two Governments in the coming months.

Lord Morrow: I, too, congratulate the Member for bringing this matter to the House. I certainly do not wish to change the tone or tenor of the debate, because I recognise that we are debating an important and solemn issue this afternoon.

This is an era in which we hear much about human rights. It is interesting to note that those who shout the loudest about such issues are strangely muted — to put it mildly — when it comes to the issues regarding the

disappeared. If ever there was a violation of human rights, that is surely one of the greatest.

I listened intently to what Mr McCausland said, and I waited for Mr Adams's reply. Alas, although Mr Adams said that he refuted what Mr McCausland had said, he did not elaborate on why he refuted it. As we travel through life, our pasts can sometimes come to haunt us, our consciences can often prick us, and we can often find ourselves in difficult positions. Mr Adams's party claims to want human rights; this would be a good place to start. This would be the time to show that it not only wants human rights for its own group and organisation, but that it wants them to be extended to all and sundry.

I wonder whether Sinn Féin regards the disappearance of individuals as a crime. I cannot help but refer to an instance when one of its members was asked whether he classified the murder of Jean McConville as a crime. His answer was, "I do not". Therefore, a mother of 10 is taken from her home and she has never been seen or heard of since, and that is not a crime. Frankly, if that is not a crime, I am at a loss to understand what a crime really is. How could anyone take a mother from 10 young children who needed her most, when her alleged crime was that she stopped to give assistance to a soldier, or someone who was in trouble or who had been shot? That was Jean McConville's crime. God help society if we have not moved on from that. I thought that this society was supposed to be moving on. However, it seems that some things will not change.

I, too, met the family that was referred to earlier. I listened to the pain and anguish of the mother, who was more than 80 years of age, as she yearned for her son whom she would never see again. She reminded me that her husband died of a broken heart because their son had been taken away and had never been seen again. She said that she hoped and prayed, before her time came, that her son would be returned. She said that she did not want vengeance; she just wanted to be able to bury her son and visit the graveyard on a Sunday afternoon to place a bunch of flowers in memory of one whom she loved dear.

2.15 pm

There is a responsibility on Sinn Féin. It knows something. Society is crying out, and the families of the disappeared are turning to Sinn Féin directly for help. Nothing that Nelson McCausland said changed the tone of the debate, but we are saying to Sinn Féin directly that it must give more. It knows more than it is telling those families, and it must give them assistance, and tell them exactly where their loved ones are. That is not too much to ask. Sinn Féin would demand it if the situation was the other way round.

The families of the disappeared are not asking for vengeance. They are not asking for very much.

Nevertheless, Sinn Féin has a responsibility to assist those families in every way that it possibly can in order to ensure that their loved ones get a funeral. That is all that they are asking for — a place that they can visit.

I appeal to Sinn Féin to give whatever information it can today.

Mr Elliott: As colleagues have done, I offer my sincere sympathy to the families of the disappeared. The situation has been a heartbreaking one for those families over the past years. I appeal to many Members to put themselves in the families' position for a short time, and to think of the anguish and pain that they have gone through, not just in recent months and years, but over decades. Think of a situation in which you, as a member of society and as a family member, have a loved one taken away from you for no reason at all, and then have to listen to the speculation and rumours that abound, sometimes from within your community, the media, or from some of those people who are supposed to be "in the know". However, the heartbreak still goes on for the family members. I appeal to anyone who has any knowledge of these matters, inside or outside the Assembly, to come forward with it.

I welcome Dominic Bradley's motion, but that in itself is not enough. The families of the disappeared have suffered over the years. Sometimes they have been offered a chink of light, and, thankfully, in some cases, that has been successful. However, others have been given high hopes and thought that they were going to receive positive news, but, all of a sudden, their hopes were brought back down again. That is one of the worst situations that a person could be in. Having lived with despair for years, all of a sudden there is some hope that the body of a loved one can be brought home for a Christian burial, only to have that hope taken away.

Please let us not get into that situation again, if at all possible. We want to give those families real hope, and that is what I am asking for today. Let us give those families some satisfaction that they can bring their loved ones home.

Watching the despair of some of those families witnessing searches, it is not helpful for them, morally or psychologically, to have to do that, and then to be brought back down with no positive result.

The circumstances of the disappearances must also be considered, and colleagues on this side of the Chamber raised some of those issues. Please do not let us return to a situation in which people are taken from their loved ones and, we assume, murdered for no reason. Thankfully, the Province has moved on somewhat from that, but we want to keep it moving on. Do not let us fall back into the despair that we had for several decades. We cannot allow society to do that. If one thing can be taken from this affair, it is the positive nature of what has

happened over the past few years, and the fact that we are trying to move on. However, almost as a mirror image of some of those things that have happened to the families of the disappeared, we have been brought back down again by people pushing the Assembly into stalemate.

If we are to move on, let us move on not only the political situation, but with for those families that have experienced years of despair, discouragement and anxiety. Let us give them some hope, as well as the rest of society.

Mr Shannon: I fully support the motion, and congratulate the proposer for bringing it to the Chamber. The wording of the motion says everything that should be said on the matter. It is a shame and disgrace that the motion even needs to be brought to the Assembly to be addressed. I add my sympathies and support to all those who have lost loved ones, and who are unable properly to grieve and achieve closure.

It has been said that there is only one certainty in life, and that is death. A day is appointed for each of us to pass from this life and on to the next, and the best for which one can hope is to be remembered, perhaps with a fond memory and a smile, by those who are left behind. However, as with many things in life, things do not always go the way that we plan or had hoped. We have families and children devastated by the loss of a parent. It is a horrible fact that people die every day in the Province, but what is more horrible is that the bodies of those who have been murdered, and who are now the disappeared, lie in the cold earth, their whereabouts unknown to their families.

I am told that there are five stages of coming to terms with grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, perhaps, acceptance. It takes varying times in order for a person to go through those stages. Grief cannot always be measured or compared, as everyone takes it differently. However, what is even worse is that the grief of the families of the disappeared is as real today as it was on the day that their loved ones disappeared.

Most people gain some closure at a wake and funeral, as they say goodbye to their loved ones. Although that is not the end of the grief, it is a major part of the expression of that grief. I support the motion because too many families in the Province have not been allowed properly to grieve the loss of their loved ones. There are those whose fathers, sons, brothers, mothers, daughters or sisters were murdered, and who have not had the chance to gain closure at a funeral because there has been no body to bury.

I dislike the term “the disappeared”. It lends itself to an image of a sort of abduction, but that is not the case. It is not something from ‘The X-files’ or anything like that. People on Earth can answer to this matter, and they can solve the problem. Those people were taken and murdered by people connected to this Province,

and someone in this Province knows the location of each of those who have been disappeared.

They have not vanished into thin air; their remains are somewhere, and there are those who know where they are. Having remains would in no way bring the loved one back, but it would bring the mourners some comfort in being able to carry out a Christian burial, and to have somewhere to go to lay flowers and shed tears. The matter is really about common decency, and the right to have respect in life and death. It is clear that those who carried out those murders have no respect for life, but they should at least allow for the sanctity of someone resting in peace, which gives relatives a sense of peace.

Who holds the information? For the sake of decency, I plead with those who have the knowledge and the information to allow families to gain closure, and to bury their loved ones’ remains in an acceptable fashion.

There are those who have information and others who are able to exert influence on those who have the information. I urge those people and all Members to do the right thing to allow families to have a proper resting place that can then become a point for their grief.

Mr Farry mentioned Lisa Dorrian, and I know that case from my constituency of Strangford. I have met the Dorrian family, and I am aware of the grief from which they suffer each and every day. I urge those who have information on that case to come forward.

There is much talk in Northern Ireland about moving forward, and that is right and proper, but I have always maintained that that should be done while remembering and respecting the past. Whether Catholic or Protestant, male or female, and no matter what creed or colour, people should be allowed to grieve and come to a place of acceptance. That cannot be done while wondering where one’s husband’s remains are.

For the sake of the Province and of families that are torn apart, let us have no more talk of the disappeared. Let us have honesty from every section of the community and allow people their human right to grieve. Whoever you are and whatever you have done, you have the chance to eventually do the right thing. Take it, and let those people have their time to mourn properly. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Alex Attwood.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Conflict Transformation Centre

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to ensure that the conflict transformation centre at the Maze does not glorify terrorism. (AQO 855/09)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, before I answer the question, I take this opportunity to express, on behalf of my family, our deepest appreciation and thanks to you and to all Members of the House for the many expressions of support and condolences that I received after the recent death of my mother.

The master plan for the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site includes the proposed international centre for conflict transformation. It is envisaged that the centre will have international, local and community-level conferencing facilities, and that it will offer research, study and academic activities. For example, it is envisaged that it will host summer schools and study visits, offer research fellowships, facilitate archiving and provide a shared space for visitor access, events and exhibitions. The objective of the proposed centre is to promote and encourage peace building so that other nations and regions across the world suffering from conflict will benefit from the experience gained here.

Mr McClarty: In light of the very real concerns about the conflict transformation centre becoming a shrine and a centre of controversy, will the two First Ministers consider delisting and removing the existing buildings so that everyone has the opportunity to move forward?

The deputy First Minister: At present, an extensive programme to demolish buildings and structures is under way. That will be completed in this calendar year. The first phase of substantial remediation work to remove contamination at part of the site is also near completion.

Recently, we approved a £3.5 million second-stage remediation programme that is essential to prepare the site for future use. As the funding suggests, second-stage remediation is extensive and will entail, for example,

the removal of diesel oil spillages and contaminates from other parts of the site.

Given the recent downturn in the global economy, those essential public works will not only provide employment in the building sector but will help to promote confidence in the economy here.

The delisting of buildings on the site, however, is a much more controversial aspect. If we are to resolve the issue over what to do with the Maze/Long Kesh site, as I hope that we can, we must examine the holistic aspect of the site and the enormous advantages that it offers to the Assembly and the Executive.

Mr McCausland: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Is he aware that members of the Sinn Féin club at Queen's University, in describing a visit to the H-blocks at the Maze on their website, paid homage to the bravery of the hunger strikers and the prisoners, and said that the resistance and the resilience of the prisoners were a constant source of inspiration? Does the deputy First Minister agree that, in using words such as "homage" and "inspiration", it is clear that members of his party already regard the H-blocks as a republican shrine?

The deputy First Minister: I strongly believe that this part of the world has much to offer the international experience. Many Members, from all sides of the House, have been invited to various parts of the world to offer their contributions and experiences, which have allowed people to consider whether those experiences hold any lessons for them.

From my involvement with people, including unionist members of the House, it appears that there is a demand for our contributions and experience, which will exist for the next 10 or 20 years. A strong argument exists for the establishment in the North of a conflict transformation centre that has international appeal.

Efforts to attract support for a centre would be undermined if the Long Kesh site were turned into a shrine to whomever. The European Union has already expressed its support for a centre. Its task force has indicated that it would be suitable to site a centre here.

I do not want anybody to do or say anything premature. I am unaware of the comments that were recorded by students after a visit to the H-blocks; no doubt people will record their own experiences when they visit the site. The important thing for me is that we do not have a shrine at the Long Kesh site. We want a meaningful centre for conflict transformation where people from other parts of the globe can learn from our experiences, and, in doing so, bring enormous benefits to us in the North. Such a centre would be a massive focus for international attention and bring many more visitors to this part of our island.

Mr Ford: I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement implicitly criticising those who wish to turn part of the Maze site into a shrine. Earlier, in his substantive answer to Mr McClarty, the Minister referred to little other than remediation of the site. Last year, Ministers told us that they would confound the sceptics by the progress that they intended to make; I am not yet confounded — although I would like to be — on the inability of the Executive to deliver anything substantial on the Maze site. Will the Minister tell us what will be done substantively rather than by remediation?

The deputy First Minister: I have been critical in interviews of the fact that we have not moved more speedily to develop the Maze/Long Kesh site in the interest of our people. I hope that over the course of the coming period, we can see progress on that issue.

The Member referred to those who wish to see a shrine at Long Kesh; I do not know anybody who has argued for a shrine at Long Kesh. I have heard people from the unionist persuasion articulate a view that that is what republicans want. Let me state here and now: that is not what republicans want. Republicans want, alongside our unionist colleagues who have contributed to the many visits and trips that we have been on — I have been to Sri Lanka, the Basque country and Iraq, and many other people in this House have made similar trips — a viable, meaningful centre that will contribute to world peace, not a shrine to anybody. If anything, what will happen at the site will be a shrine to peace building, not just here in the north of Ireland, but in the world.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

2. **Mr Brolly** asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to detail how the rollout of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland will provide opportunities for the local construction industry in the short term. (AQO 893/09)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive's investment strategy will result in up to £20 billion being invested by 2018 to tackle the legacy of decades of underinvestment. Our investment strategy has special relevance to the construction industry. The First Minister and I recognise the seriousness of the situation facing the construction industry and are particularly concerned about recent reports regarding future employment levels.

We recently had a valuable meeting with construction industry representatives, who put their concerns and ideas to us directly. We are considering them carefully with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and will respond shortly. We believe that we have established a good basis for further engagement with the industry. Our Department is working with construction employers,

SIB and other Departments to ensure that we do our utmost to help the construction industry within the resources that are available to the Administration.

Our construction industry stands to benefit significantly from the 10-year investment strategy that has been agreed by the Executive. The procurement of projects under the investment strategy will be taken forward in full compliance with procurement rules, and there will be opportunities for our local construction industry, either as a lead contractor or as part of the supply chain.

The Executive are determined to deliver the investment strategy to the fullest extent possible. We must recognise that we are constrained by the funding available to us; however, it should be remembered that just over five years ago, infrastructure investment was less than £1 billion per annum. Last year, it amounted to almost £1.4 billion, and it is planned to reach £2 billion per annum by the end of this Budget period. That is a measure of the progress that we have made, and a signal of the Executive's ambition to go further.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail the arrangements that are in place to monitor the delivery of projects by Departments?

The deputy First Minister: New arrangements are being implemented to monitor the timely delivery of projects and programmes by Departments and agencies. A detailed delivery-tracking system for the investment strategy is being rolled out across Departments. Working closely with DFP and other Departments, the Strategic Investment Board is leading the development and management of the system.

When fully operational, the delivery-tracking system will enable the Executive to have a detailed performance-monitoring framework that shows progress against the 23 sub-pillars in the strategy. In addition, the construction industry will be able to access directly information about future work that is in the pipeline to help with that sector's business planning.

The Central Procurement Directorate will advise on the most appropriate procurement strategies and work with the Strategic Investment Board and Departments to implement suitable delivery arrangements and enhance the delivery capacity of Departments and agencies.

Mr Burnside: Does the deputy First Minister agree that although it is all very well having an investment strategy for Northern Ireland, the credit crisis has destroyed investment opportunities for firms and there is no cash available in the financial system? Will he provide evidence that he has made representations to Her Majesty's Government, the Treasury and the National Economic Council, which was established after the nationalisation of much of the British banking system, to help companies to invest and to help small businesses to get favourable credit facilities to allow them to escape the recession?

The deputy First Minister: The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) are involved in ongoing discussions with the British Government. When we have the opportunity, we discuss the economic situation in detail with the British Prime Minister. These are difficult times, not just for our small economy but for many democracies throughout the world that are suffering. I am sure that all Members, like myself, are keen to see the outcome of the pending US presidential election, which could have massive financial implications for the planet.

It is important to recognise that there are huge challenges before us. We have a limited ability to remedy the difficulties that exist. There will be some £6 billion available to us over the next three years and up to £20 billion available over the next 10 years — we must ensure that that money is used to benefit our construction industry. This is not a time to be defeatist or a time to throw the arms up — this is a time to knuckle down and recognise that there is much that we can do, in spite of the great challenges that exist.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Construction Employers Federation recently suggested that some public-sector projects should be brought forward. In light of the instability that has been created by the lack of Executive meetings, will the deputy First Minister outline what has been done by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to effect that proposal? Does he agree that doing nothing is not an option and that the stalemate between the DUP and Sinn Féin is an embarrassment?

The deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Strategic Investment Board are working closely with DFP to ensure that the available capital resources are deployed as effectively as possible. We met all the different interest groups in society that are experiencing pressure, so we are aware of the need to ensure that the Executive take decisions that will benefit those people.

We are not powerless, and it is wrong to say that nothing is being done. I agree that there is a difficulty, which must be overcome, and I hope that that happens in the not too distant future. As we proceed, we must recognise that although there are huge challenges before us, we have resources available that we can use to benefit the construction industry.

2.45 pm

It is unacceptable to all Members that people, particularly construction workers and employers, go through such difficulties at present. Therefore, it is our duty and responsibility to explore every prospect, idea and suggestion that we receive — several of which have been received in recent weeks. We will advance that work through discussions with the Strategic Investment

Board and different interest groups in a manner that will, I hope, allow us to meet the challenges that clearly lie before us.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

3. **Mrs Long** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has given of the role of central Government in delivering cohesion, sharing and integration. (AQO 872/09)

The deputy First Minister: At the outset, I apologise to members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and to other Members, that the First Minister and I have been unable to honour our commitment to provide the draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration to the Committee before the Halloween recess.

Having said that, I must make several points. First, the delay should not be taken as an indication that we do not regard building a shared and better future for all our people to be a top priority. Indeed, it is because we consider it so important that we want to take a little longer to tighten and clarify our proposals.

Secondly, I remind Members that we do not work in a good-relations vacuum while the refreshed policy proposals are finalised. The work to challenge sectarianism, racism and all forms of intolerance continues to great effect — with the active support of my colleagues, I must add. Last year, we spent £6 million to support good-relations work throughout all 26 council areas. This year, we will have spent £8 million, which includes £1 million that was specifically directed to support minority-ethnic groups, as well as many vital initiatives to tackle sectarianism and racism.

Although many issues must be dealt with, my Department's recently published good-relations indicators confirm many positive trends that reflect tangible improvements in the nature of society. OFMDFM's role in the cross-cutting good-relations policy is central, pivotal and directional. We will ensure that the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration contributes to our overarching policy to achieve a peaceful, fair and prosperous society, in which there is respect for the rule of law, thereby ensuring a shared and better future for all our people.

Our work demonstrates our commitment to build cohesive, inclusive communities. The fact that we have already begun to deliver the additional funding that was secured in the Executive's Budget means that vital work on the ground and with new communities is better resourced than in recent years. Obviously, 2008's peaceful summer is attributable to the dedication of youth workers and interface workers. Our role is to ensure that their efforts are recognised, resourced and supported.

Finally, some Member will surely ask when the policy will be provided to the Committee and the Assembly. We have made the matter a top priority. We will clarify timescales with the Committee as soon as possible.

Mrs Long: When I tabled the question, I hoped, rather than expected, that the Committee would have the document by now. I understand what the deputy First Minister said, but how perfect does the consultation document need to be at this stage? Given that feedback will be received from different groups during lengthy consultation, must the document be gilded before it is issued? Is it not wiser to present the Committee with the document in its current state so that the consultation process can proceed? That appears to belie a complete lack of urgency on the matter.

The deputy First Minister: I want to dispel the notion that there is a lack of urgency on the issue. We recognise the importance of introducing the plan for cohesion, sharing and integration. A little more time is required. I am sure that, when it is eventually handed over, Members will recognise that it was worth the wait.

Mr Kennedy: I share other Members' frustration about the strategy's delay. Can the deputy First Minister confirm whether the delay is in any way connected to his party's blockade of Executive meetings? Irrespective of that, when will he and his party catch themselves on and start to work for the people of Northern Ireland?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The deputy First Minister: The Members on this side of the House work extremely hard for all the people of the North of Ireland. The criticism that was levelled at the delay in publishing the report is justified, but that has nothing to do with the present situation between Sinn Féin and its partners in Government. We must expedite the publication of the report, and we firmly intend that it will be published sooner rather than later.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the deputy First Minister agree that sectarianism remains the biggest problem in, and divider of, communities in Northern Ireland? Will he identify to the Assembly the Government's role in promoting reconciliation and tackling sectarianism?

The deputy First Minister: Sectarianism and racism are terrible evils in our society. Members' experience over the past few years of coming together in the Assembly and embarking on a new course — albeit one of uncharted waters for many — clearly suggests to the vast majority of people that times have changed. However, the Assembly cannot eradicate sectarianism or racism overnight; it will be a process that requires people to lead by example. Members' role is to provide political leadership through the Assembly. Community leaders also have a huge responsibility to set an example, and that is happening. The extremely

hard work by many people in the youth and community sectors continues to complement Members' efforts.

As we move forward, it is important to recognise that there is a process involved. Sectarian bigots and racists exist, and the Assembly's job is to cut the space available to them through leading by example. We must take the necessary decisions to ensure support and funding for those who work at the coalface to defeat those twin evils.

Strategy for Children and Young People

4. Ms S Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it will ensure Departments deliver against targets set out in the strategy for children and young people. (AQO 901/09)

The deputy First Minister: The junior Ministers are responsible for the co-ordination of policy that impacts on the lives of children and young people, and they are driving forward the 10-year strategy. OFMDFM is developing a three-year cross-departmental action plan in order to contribute to the delivery of that strategy. The action plan is for a specific period of three years and reflects the priorities in the Programme for Government and associated public service agreements. It will include input from all Departments, the NIO and the Court Service.

OFMDFM will send to ministerial colleagues the conclusions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Department will ask them to consider any further specific recommendations for inclusion in the action plan. The junior Ministers established and chair the strategy planning and review group (SPRG), whose role is to advise on, and monitor the implementation of, the strategy's action plans. Recently, the group received draft copies of the three-year action plan. Ministers will consult with SPRG and give due regard to its views.

Key Departments are represented on SPRG, and it will submit review reports to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which is also chaired by the junior Ministers. That provides a platform for highlighting progress at ministerial level. OFMDFM intends to publish biannual progress reports that will identify any targets that individual Departments are unlikely to meet. In addition, each Department has nominated a champion for children and young people in order to promote their interests and to ensure that their views on policy and strategy are sought.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. I appreciate that individual Ministers and the junior Ministers are working hard in order to ensure the implementation of the 10-year strategy for children and young people. I am interested in the three-year action plan, and if the deputy First Minister would highlight some of its

specifics to give Members a feel for the current state of play, I would appreciate that.

The deputy First Minister: The action plan seeks to highlight the key pieces of work that will make the largest contribution to the delivery of improved outcomes. It recognises new and targeted actions, as well as the ongoing work that continues to have a positive impact on the lives of children and young people.

It has been developed to include three main elements in each outcome area. Key pieces of ongoing work have been successful and continue to benefit children and young people. Furthermore, key pieces of work have been amended to extend current provision, build on achievements or address areas in which the desired impact was not being achieved. During the three-year period, new actions have been implemented to improve outcomes for all children and young people. The draft action plan is being discussed by the strategy planning and review groups, the views of which will be used to develop a revised draft.

Mr Shannon: Although I appreciate the deputy First Minister's response, elected representatives and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are frustrated by the lacklustre approach to delivering the Committee's 47 recommendations.

Does the Minister agree that it is imperative that all Departments — such as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department for Employment and Learning and, in particular, the Department of Education — deliver a strategy urgently in order to address child poverty directly and not tinker around the edges?

The deputy First Minister: I am disappointed that the Member considers our approach lacklustre. I disagree with that analysis; much good work has been done, and the process has now reached the action stage, whereby cross-departmental work is under way to ensure delivery for young people. It is critical that the process advance speedily, and I am satisfied that the junior Ministers, who have been charged with that responsibility, are acutely aware of the need to progress that matter as quickly as possible.

Mr McNarry: The deputy First Minister mentioned action plans. However, in my constituency of Strangford, 6,300 children live in poverty. In light of the economic downturn, will the deputy First Minister outline whether Executive targets for eradicating child poverty are realisable?

The deputy First Minister: All Members recognise that such figures are unacceptable, and other Members could cite similar figures from their constituencies. Those figures highlight the extent of the problem and the Assembly's responsibility to reduce child poverty dramatically. The Programme for Government outlines our targets. The worldwide economic situation affects

all Governments, not least the Assembly. However, Members should be confident that we can reduce those unacceptably high figures, not only in Mr McNarry's constituency but in others.

Integrated Development Fund

5. Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister how it intends to build on the work of the Integrated Development Fund to redress poverty and inequality. (AQO 892/09)

8. Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to provide an update on the projects currently under way, or agreed, that will be funded by the integrated development fund in Derry/Londonderry and in north and west Belfast. (AQO 907/09)

The deputy First Minister: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 5 and 8 together. The integrated development fund (IDF) was established in 2003 as a pilot scheme to promote greater local partnership in a range of sectors, including selected areas of Departments. To date, eight north-west IDF projects and 15 projects from west Belfast/Greater Shankill have been formally approved. The total cost of those projects is almost £92 million, and IDF support totalling almost £29 million has been made available to bring them to a conclusion.

In addition, seven projects from the north-west and three from west Belfast/Greater Shankill have, in principle, received approval but have yet to be submitted for full approval. The estimated cost of those projects is almost £46 million, with an IDF element totalling more than £19 million. The Department is happy to provide details of individual projects on request, and it is considering correspondence from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the future of the west Belfast and Greater Shankill task force initiative.

3.00 pm

We remain committed to addressing poverty and inequality for all our people. The Executive will shortly consider proposals for the adoption of Lifetime Opportunities, which is an overall strategy for tackling poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. Those proposals include the establishment of an Executive subcommittee to identify priorities and develop a cross-departmental action plan to address poverty and social exclusion. The work of that subcommittee is expected to include consideration of how existing and developing cross-cutting strategies can contribute to better equality of opportunity and realisation of the poverty targets contained in the Programme for Government.

ENVIRONMENT

Local Government Boundaries Commissioner

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of the Environment what is his assessment of the recommendations made by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner in his Provisional Recommendations Report.

(AQO 835/09)

13. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the consideration given by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to the identity of local communities in his Review of Northern Ireland Government Boundaries Provisional Recommendations Report.

(AQO 844/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 13 together.

The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner has been tasked with providing recommendations for the names and boundaries of the 11 new local government districts referred to in the Local Government (Boundaries) (Northern Ireland) Act 2008 and for the number, names and boundaries of the wards that will compose them.

The Commissioner's provisional recommendations form an important part of the process of consultation on the new boundaries. That will include public hearings, which the commissioner has arranged in each of the 11 proposed local council districts and which will provide an opportunity for oral representation. The hearings are scheduled to take place between 20 and 28 November. If individuals, communities or their representatives wish to comment on the provisional recommendations, in relation to local identities or any other matter, they have an opportunity to make representations to the Commissioner, either at the public hearings or in writing.

The commissioner is independent of central Government, so it is not for me or my Department to make an assessment of the provisional recommendations or any aspect of those recommendations. I will read the final report with great interest, but it would be inappropriate for me to comment at this stage.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Does he not accept that, since they rejected amendments to the legislation that would have given the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner greater flexibility to expand natural boundaries, DUP Ministers have effectively increased the likelihood of Belfast turning green, which might prevent future civic events such as yesterday's wonderful occasion when we welcomed home our troops?

The Minister of the Environment: I am at a loss to understand where the Member comes from on this issue.

The commissioner has the ability to absorb large areas into new district council areas. There is, therefore, ample room for moving boundaries. If the Member doubts his party's ability to make effective representations to the Commissioner, he should not point the finger at me or my Department or my predecessor, but should consider instead the inadequacy of his party's resources. If he wants to make representations to the Commissioner along that lines that Belfast should remain a balanced council, there is ample opportunity for him to do so, and for the Commissioner to act on those representations — within the existing legislation and the regulations laid down by my predecessor.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give any indication as to the remit of the District Electoral Area Commissioner? What are the minimum and maximum numbers of wards to be contained in each district electoral area to ensure transparency and equality?

The Minister of the Environment: The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner has been tasked with making representations on the boundaries of the 11 new local government districts. In doing so, he can consider how many wards will be in each. The legislation provides that 60 wards may be included in Belfast and 40 in each of the other districts, but the commissioner may allow a degree of variation, that is, up to five wards either way.

It is for parties to make representations to the commissioner to ensure that boundaries are fair and that they allow local councils to reflect the make-up of those areas. As I said to the Member for Newry and Armagh, the effectiveness of those representations will depend on the ability of parties to get their act together and make known their views.

There will be an opportunity for that after the Commissioner submits his report. I will study his report initially, but it must be endorsed by the Assembly. Therefore, if people feel that the Commissioner has not done his job adequately — or they feel that there are serious flaws in his recommendations — there will be opportunities in the Assembly to make changes.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his responses thus far. Although some Members seem to have thrown in the towel as regards Belfast, it is clear that there are others who will continue to focus on that issue.

I ask the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Weir: Is the Minister confident that the timescales he set will be met by the Commissioner who has been appointed?

The Minister of the Environment: I expected the fireworks to come later in this period of Question Time, but it appears that the Members to my right are excited

about this issue: perhaps it is because they feel that they are not able to represent the people who voted for them.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of the Environment: I assure the Member who asked the question that the Commissioner has the tools to ensure that the populations within the boundaries are fairly represented and reflected and to allow parties to make effective representations.

The Commissioner is on target to complete the review on time. Consultation on the provisional recommendations has finished; the deadline for written representations is 12 November 2008, and oral hearings will take place from 20 to 28 November. The assistant commissioners will be in place before the end of the week. I have made it quite clear to the Commissioner that I expect his final report by 30 June 2009.

International Banking Crisis

2. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the financial losses accrued by local councils as a result of the international banking crisis. (AQO 863/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None of the 26 district councils has incurred a financial loss as a result of the international banking crisis.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Local councils face twin financial issues — they must deal with the implications of the review of local government and the move to 11 councils, and they must cope with the current financial downturn.

Will the Minister detail the criteria for investment funds?

The Minister of the Environment: The criteria are set out in the Trustee Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. Councils are required to carry out numerous tasks. From time to time, trustees must review the investments of the trusts and — while having regard to the standard investment criteria — should consider whether those should be varied.

The standard investment criteria relate to the suitability of trust investments of the same kind. They also relate to the need to ensure that investments are diversified, so that councils do not have all of their eggs in one basket. If that were the case, and a financial crisis occurred — such as the one that affected organisations with funds in Icelandic banks — councils would be exposed to risks.

The criteria require councils to review their investments and make sure that they do not have all of their eggs in one basket. Councils are also required to ensure that their spread of investments meet the standards that are required of investment trusts.

Mr Beggs: I am pleased that local councils have not suffered financial losses, but the Minister will be aware that local councils currently have significant debts. How will he ensure that the ratepayers in Larne and Carrickfergus, for instance, will not have to pick up the £34 million of debt that exists in Ballymena Borough Council after it built lavish new council offices?

The Minister of the Environment: The debt that has been incurred by district councils prior to the reorganisation of councils will be absorbed within the new council boundaries. There will be a larger rate base within those boundaries.

Some of the new councils may incur debts; however, they should also have assets from which ratepayers will benefit. Where there is a transfer of some areas from one council to another under the review of public administration, it will be up to the transition committees to ensure that the transfer of assets is reflected clearly in the transfer of debt. That is how inequalities will be dealt with.

Dr McDonnell: Do any of the Department of the Environment's agencies hold funds in any of the Icelandic banks that have got into difficulties?

The Minister of the Environment: The only groups that were likely to hold such funds are the councils and, as I made clear in an earlier answer, none of the councils holds funds in Icelandic banks. Nor do councils hold assets with banks that are not covered by the guarantees that have been given by the UK Government or by the Government in the Republic.

Bryson House

3. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the contribution of Bryson House to the waste management strategy. (AQO 842/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I acknowledge fully the valuable contribution made by Bryson House to achieving the objectives of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy. Recently, I visited the Bryson House facility and saw the excellent work that is being done there. Recycling and recovery are an important part of the progressive transition towards better resource management. I have no doubt that Bryson's kerbside box-collection scheme — which started in my council area in 1999 — has contributed to the material-recycling facility and to the increase in recycling from 4.9% in 1999 to 27.7% in 2006-07.

The success of the strategy largely depends upon changing attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, I welcome initiatives such as the innovative Bryson House schools-education programme Sort It Out, which has raised awareness and encourages best practice and behavioural change. Programmes such as that will help us to achieve

our main aim — a cultural shift towards better resource management and improved environmental quality. That programme is a good example of how to deliver key messages concerning waste to our young people.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will know that waste management is an important issue — indeed, there was a conference in the Long Gallery earlier today about it. Does the Minister intend to continue funding Bryson House after 31 March 2009?

The Minister of the Environment: My officials are considering the future of the community waste innovation fund, through which Bryson House is funded. That is part of the implementation of the waste management strategy. However, there are no firm plans to extend the fund beyond March 2009, simply because the Department has not yet received the evaluation of it. The fund involves a considerable amount of money, so it would be wrong to proceed without a proper evaluation.

We must examine the evaluation before I can consider whether there should be a successor to the community waste innovation fund. However, as I said in the Long Gallery today, we want to improve the communications strategy by putting resources into it; given the kind of work that Bryson House is undertaking, I have no doubt that it will be in a position to bid for some of that work.

Ms J McCann: What discussion has the Minister's Department had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to develop opportunities for other social-economy enterprises to contribute to the waste management strategy?

The Minister of the Environment: Bryson House is the major social enterprise that is implementing the waste management strategy.

I want to encourage social enterprise, and that is an area in which it can do a good job. Bryson House has used some of its profits from recycling to reinvest in socially worthwhile programmes throughout Northern Ireland, including schemes to make areas safer. That is the way forward.

Although I have not had any discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, when I visited Bryson House a couple of weeks ago, I spoke to its representatives about the importance of social enterprise and how it can result in money being ploughed back into local areas. That is a good model, which I hope we can develop.

3.15 pm

Mr Cree: My question is similar to the previous one. What action has the Minister taken to encourage local job creation by growing recycling businesses?

In addition, concerning the link between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, rather than having just one social-economy business, Bryson House, does the Minister envisage any potential for further developing the social economy?

The Minister of the Environment: There are opportunities for organisations that seek niche markets. However, although recycling rates must increase, there is a limit to how effective it can be. I am sure that Bryson House and other recyclers will have suffered owing to the vagaries of the market. Over the past week, many recyclable materials — such as glass, paper and woodchip — have had a nil value. Consequently, we must be careful not to put all our eggs into one basket, and we must not overemphasise the potential of such enterprises. Nevertheless, given the fact that niche schemes have an impact on local communities, social enterprises should undertake such schemes because they are the only enterprises that are likely to plough profits back into those communities.

Irish Hare: Protection

4. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the level of protection given to the Irish hare in Northern Ireland, in comparison to that afforded to the species in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 817/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In Northern Ireland, the Irish hare is a quarry species, the hunting of which is regulated under extant game laws, and they are protected in the close season. In addition, from 2004, the Irish hare has been protected by annual special protection orders, which prevent the taking, sale and killing of the species. Such protection is in contrast to that provided in the Irish Republic by the Green Party's Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, who has refused to protect the Irish hare. By introducing a special protection order this year, I have protected the Irish hare, and I understand that several hares have already sought asylum on this side of the border. *[Laughter.]*

There has been some opposition to that from obvious sources, and the Equality Commission is reviewing my actions to ensure that I am not convening any race or colour legislation by protecting the English brown hare. However, I assure the Member that, despite my reputation, I am greener on this matter than the Minister in the Irish Republic.

Mr Wells: I welcome the Minister's assurance that the Irish hare will continue to be protected, and it is ironic that the Green Party's Minister in the Irish Republic has failed to do the same. Will the Minister embarrass

the Irish Minister even further by announcing permanent protection for the Irish hare in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of the Environment: Let me make it clear to the Member: the special protection order is being renewed year on year, and the objective is to increase the density of hares in Northern Ireland to one hare per square kilometre by 2010.

Such Orders are renewed annually in order to ascertain their effect. If we find that they help us to achieve our target, there is an opportunity to make permanent legislation on the matter.

Between now and 2010, it is important that we look carefully at the impact of the Order year to year to see whether we are achieving our goals.

Mrs M Bradley: What co-operation has there been between the North and the South on the protection of the Irish hare? The Minister can let the hare out of the bag. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: Having done my bit during Question Time for cross-border relations and for relations with the Green Party's Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the Republic, I can say that co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic exists on the issue. However, I accept that they are slightly behind us, and we have to drag them along a little. An all-Ireland species-action plan was published jointly by the former Environment and Heritage Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in November 2005. That plan identified several actions that were aimed at promoting increases in the respective populations.

Mr Ford: I have no doubt that the Minister enjoyed the opportunity to blow his trumpet — or, in fact, the trumpet of the Assembly in its first guise — for the protection that is afforded to the Irish hare in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, I acknowledge that his party colleagues — with the exception of Mr Shannon — voted in favour of my amendment to the legislation at that time, which enhanced that protection. However, the legislation lacks protection for hares that are being imported illegally across the border. In view of the Minister's concern for cross-border relations, I thought that he would take action on those illegal importations.

In response to a question for written answer, the Minister informed me that it costs £30,000 every year to implement the temporary Special Protection Order. Why will he not do the decent thing on environmental, welfare and financial grounds and introduce permanent protection?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member ought to read more carefully the answers that I give him. Had he done so, he would have seen that the £30,000 costs are not for the implementation of the temporary Special Protection Order; that money is

spent on monitoring whether the protection is leading to an increase in the hare population in Northern Ireland. Even if a permanent Special Protection Order were in place, the £30,000 would be spent on monitoring its effectiveness. To suggest that putting a permanent Special Protection Order in place would save £30,000 shows either that the Member has difficulty in understanding my answers to him or that he is trying to use my answer in a way that was not intended.

Climate Change Bill

5. Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's position in relation to the Climate Change Bill. (AQO 888/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I would have been disappointed had I not been asked a question on climate change. I think that some Member has managed to ask such a question in every Question Time so far — albeit the Members are becoming less inventive. It appears that the system has ensured that those questions are near the top of the list, and I am happy for that to be the case.

The Department continues to provide relevant input to the passage of the Climate Change Bill at Westminster. It agrees arrangements with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on funding arrangements for the Committee on Climate Change, and it provides an input to the implementation of the Bill. Members will be pleased to hear that in the two most recent communications that I had with the DEFRA Minister Hilary Benn on the implementation of the legislation on climate change, I made it clear to him that the proposed measures on carbon trading and carbon reduction — which would lead to a 45% increase in electricity bills — were unacceptable. I believe that my comments reflect the views of all Members on that matter.

Additionally, the Department is taking forward discussions on governance arrangements in respect of the Climate Change Bill.

Mr Dallat: I have listened carefully to the Minister. I am pleased that he has dispelled the rumours that he has been awarded an honorary degree from the Bart Simpson school of environmental science. *[Laughter.]*

Last week, the Minister took part in a debate at Westminster, where he acted with the Noes. Does he believe that Northern Ireland has any reasonable chance of representation in respect of the Climate Change Bill, bearing in mind the scandalous way in which he behaved?

The Minister of the Environment: It is appropriate during questions to the Environment Minister that the

Member should recycle some of his jokes. They do not get any better. *[Laughter.]*

The Climate Change Bill has passed through the House of Commons, and will go to the House of Lords. If it passes through the House of Lords unchanged, there will be targets for 80% reductions in CO₂ emissions by 2050, by which time, of course, none of us will be around to take account of whether that target was achieved.

As I look around the Chamber, I am surrounded by Members who have taken the same view on this subject as I have — namely that an 80% target, resulting in a reduction of CO₂ emissions to 1990 levels by 2050, is not possible.

Every measure that the Government suggested we need to take to achieve those levels has been rejected by all parties in the Assembly. One of the principal measures was to increase the price of fuel, including petrol, and all parties in the Assembly have rejected that suggestion. Another major measure was to reduce carbon emissions from power stations, which — according to the Government's admission in letters to me — would increase the price of electricity by 45%. All Members have rejected that suggestion on the grounds of fuel poverty. Another measure was to increase the tax on cars with high carbon emissions, which Members have also rejected because many people in Northern Ireland own cars that are more than seven years old.

The only measure to receive widespread endorsement by Members is the insulation of homes, which, according to the Budget paper, will have a minimal impact on carbon emissions. All Members have doubts about the Climate Change Bill.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree with setting annual targets for emission reductions, as provided for in the Scottish Climate Change Bill?

The Minister of the Environment: No, I do not. One must look at the influences on carbon emissions. For example, a bout of very bad winter weather that would cause people to use more home heating oil and electricity — which are both major sources of emissions — would mean that the target could be missed completely. The output of carbon depends, among other matters, on the weather and economic activity, and the current downturn may well lead to a reduction in carbon emissions this year. However, the economy may grow next year, and that could lead to another increase. It is nonsensical to set year-on-year targets because they are fairly pointless, bearing in mind that so many factors can influence them.

Mr McClarty: Last week, in another place, the Minister spoke against the Climate Change Bill, and he was one of only five out of 645 MPs to vote against an amendment that will require improvements in energy

efficiency. Given that five of his colleagues voted in favour of the Bill, is he now not only at odds with his Department, but with his own divided party?

The Minister of the Environment: The Members on the Benches to my right know all about divided parties — *[Interruption.]*

3.30 pm

Some Members: Answer the question.

The Minister of the Environment: That party has more divisions than there have been in the House of Commons over the Climate Change Bill. *[Laughter.]*

The Member has described the Climate Change Bill as a Bill that promotes energy efficiency. The Bill, as passed through the House of Commons, requires draconian cuts in carbon emissions. According to the Government's Budget 2007, those cuts can be achieved only by increasing fuel and energy prices, cutting farm outputs and introducing a range of other measures, including a 20% target for biofuels. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of the Environment: Many people have said that such a target is unrealistic. All I say to the Member is that if he can produce for the Assembly ideas and recommendations on how to achieve that target without hurting constituents, and hurting them badly, I will support his recommendations. If he cannot, I will not.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Green Rebate

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will give a commitment in principle to provide a "green rebate" on rates to encourage greater use of renewable technologies. (AQO 926/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The Executive decided to proceed with two proposals on the matter. One offered rates rebates to owner-occupiers to bring their houses up to modern insulation standards, and the other offered initial rates exemption to the first residents of new homes that are assessed as being zero-carbon-rated. The consultation on the details of those policies ended on 26 September, and departmental officials briefed the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the outcome of the process on 8 October. I am considering the consultation outcome and the Committee's views, and I will then take a decision on a way forward. I will announce the scheme's final shape shortly. The details will also be published as part of the consultation report on all remaining rating policies.

I can now say that the rates rebate is for insulation work to houses. That measure is likely to make the biggest value-for-money difference to the energy efficiency of our housing stock. If the scheme proves to be successful, it may be worthwhile extending it to include renewable technologies.

Mr McGlone: Given that grants for renewables were withdrawn earlier this year, can the Minister expand on other measures that can be offered to encourage the use of renewable energy in domestic properties?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member refers to a previous decision on a scheme under direct rule that was time-limited, and that came to a natural end. The impact of that scheme is being reviewed. I want to make that clear.

Extending the proposed energy-efficiency rates-rebate scheme to include other measures would take more time than may be available to us. However, I will consider those issues, and I will not rule out a second phase of the scheme. The key is to ensure that the measures that would have the most immediate benefit — for example, insulation — be introduced first. That is an issue with which we will press ahead at the earliest opportunity.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has the Minister authorised a review of cost benefits to the regional economy of renewable energy, in the light of the rising cost of fossil fuels?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That matter falls within the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; if the Member wishes to pursue it, he should do so with that Department, either through tabling a motion for debate or through tabling questions.

It is an important issue. There is no doubt that decisions taken on such issues will have far-reaching consequences, not only for energy provision but for expenditure. Let us say, for example, that we decide to go down the road of increased electricity generation from wind power, which would provide the most readily accessible form of renewable energy. In that case, infrastructure work would have to be carried out to the grid, and that would require substantial investment.

Time and again at this lectern, I have been at pains to emphasise that investment decisions — on issues such as renewable energy — must be informed by an assessment of where the money will not be spent as a result of the investment. Those are big decisions on key issues, and they must be discussed thoroughly by the Assembly, the relevant Committees and the Executive.

Mr Ford: Has the Minister given any consideration to reducing or removing the fees for building control applications? Such a measure may encourage the use of small-scale renewables.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I acknowledge the Member's comments. The nature of the business is that there are costs incurred that have to be recovered. The Member's proposal to cut the costs incurred by people making building control applications may be desirable. However, once again, I emphasise that that expenditure would have to be recovered from somewhere else. All the issues cost the Executive and the Assembly money. Therefore, all matters must be considered in the round as to where the money will come from. I assure the Member that his suggestion will be given consideration.

Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme

2. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when payments will be made under the lone pensioner allowance scheme. (AQO 834/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services began to issue refunds following awards of lone pensioner allowances in July 2008. To date, some 16,078 refunds have been made to ratepayers. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which manages lone pensioner allowance applications from ratepayers who rent property, also began to make awards in July 2008. The Housing Executive has made 2,103 credit adjustments to tenants' housing accounts. Land and Property Services is working to process the remaining 1,082 applications.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Applicants for lone pensioner allowances become annoyed because of delays in payments being sent out. I am aware that looking after pensioners is a matter that is very close to the Minister's heart. Other than the lone pensioner allowance scheme, what initiatives is the Minister considering in order to help pensioners?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question. I share his frustration about people having to wait unreasonable lengths of time to receive payments. As I said, 1,082 applications still have to be processed, and I hope that those will be processed very soon. Almost £2.5 million has been awarded under the lone pensioner allowance scheme; a substantial amount of money has gone back into the pockets of pensioners who live alone.

We have implemented a number of measures to help pensioners, such as the increase from £16,000 to £50,000 in the savings limit that is applicable to pensioners under the low-income rates-relief scheme. Consultation on a rates deferment scheme for pensioners who are homeowners is nearing completion, and I propose to make an announcement on that shortly. Furthermore, the decision to freeze regional rates benefits all households in Northern Ireland, including pensioners.

We have announced proposals on data sharing, which would facilitate an increased uptake of benefits and rates relief for pensioners. Much emphasis is placed on cases of money going to the wrong people. However, many people — particularly pensioners — do not claim the benefits to which they are entitled. The data-sharing measure that we announced last week will go a long way to improving pensioners' uptake of relief schemes. I am sure that that will be welcomed throughout the community. We are also working on a fuel poverty action plan that would benefit pensioners.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his response, and I will focus on the latter part of his reply. What steps have been taken to use Government databases to reach people who are not claiming lone pensioner allowances to which they are entitled and thus increase the uptake of that important benefit?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I have said, proposals were recently announced to increase co-operation and the sharing of information and data between agencies that hold that information. There is a long way to go before any Department or agency will achieve automatic allocation of reliefs; however, progress is being made. The proposals that I outlined will go a long way to improving the position, particularly for pensioners.

I have met people in my constituency — as I am sure Mr Kennedy has in his — who come to discuss one issue only for it to emerge that they may be eligible for several reliefs and benefits. It is important that Government do more to ensure that people receive their full entitlements.

Mrs M Bradley: The Minister has allayed some of my concerns. However, will he assure me that there will be an assessment to guarantee that the application form for the lone pensioner allowance is user-friendly and that it is continuously improved to ensure that it is easily accessible to pensioners?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I assure the honourable Member that everything will be done to keep the form as simple and as accessible as possible. I understand from constituents and others who have been involved in the matter that the form is relatively straightforward, which is among the reasons why the allowance has become so popular — it is straightforward, it is clear and it is not means-tested.

Therefore, in that sense, it is straightforward and lessons may be drawn from it for other initiatives and projects in which the Department is engaged. I hope that any lone pensioners who have not availed themselves of the scheme will hear about it and do so quickly.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Prospective Homebuyers

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with banks and building societies on their ability to lend money to prospective homebuyers. (AQO 870/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The regulation of banks and building societies is a reserved matter for the Treasury and the Financial Services Authority. Members must note that the package of financial assistance announced by the Prime Minister on 13 October was specifically aimed at releasing liquidity in the banking sector and at stimulating activity to prospective homebuyers and to borrowers. I have not had direct representations from the local banking sector; however, my officials closely monitor the effect of the financial situation on the local banking sector.

Over recent weeks, I have had several meetings with key stakeholders such as the Institute of Directors and various chambers of commerce. I reassured them that the actions of the Executive will alleviate some difficulties; in particular, the Budget commitment to spend £5.5 billion on capital projects over the next three years will provide a considerable stimulus to the local economy.

Mr Burns: Is the Minister aware that certain banks require a 25% deposit before they offer a mortgage? Has the Minister made any attempt to have those banks reduce that figure?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I said, the regulation of banks is a reserved matter; it is not a matter for the Executive or the Assembly. Therefore, it is not appropriate for me to engage with banks on such issues.

Ultimately, banks are commercial operations and many offer more generous rates than that, and banks that insist on a 25% deposit will probably do much less business. Many in the construction industry, in the house-building sector and people who want to get on the property ladder have stressed the importance of banks and financial institutions recognising that they must act responsibly in the current climate. The financial situation is essentially a matter of confidence; it is about banks being prepared to lend to one another, and to businesses and individuals, at a sensible rate.

Everyone hopes that confidence will be restored. Some of the measures that have been taken, which are designed to restore liquidity in the banking sector, will work. I believe that progress is being made on that front.

3.45 pm

Mr Spratt: What is the Minister's view on the impact that the continuing fall in the property market is having? What support is available for people who are experiencing financial hardship?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am aware of the major downturn in the property market, and it is one of the reasons why I announced, at the end of last week, the suspension of the Workplace 2010 procurement exercise. I am aware of the downturn not only in the public sector, but in the private sector. That downturn is having an effect on many households. The Chancellor announced recently a range of incentives to assist people across the United Kingdom who are experiencing hardship. Those incentives include the extended mortgage-relief scheme and enhanced cold weather payments, both of which will apply in Northern Ireland.

The Executive have established a ministerial subgroup, involving the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to consider what can be done for people who are affected by fuel poverty. Issues such as the viability of a fuel-credit scheme and a targeted mortgage-rescue scheme will also form part of those deliberations.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I congratulate the Minister on the excellence of his answer. Will he take steps to assess the total acreage that is available in Northern Ireland for housing development on and off flood plains? By setting that within figures for the level of demand for homes, will he establish a reasonable base price by area for the site element of housing? In that way, some confidence can be built that the house-price level has bottomed out or is close to bottoming out, given that that is the key factor in inter-bank lending and in home-loan provision.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raised a pertinent point about our current financial situation and about inter-bank lending, which is very important. I will pay careful consideration to his suggestion. I will discuss the issue with officials and come back to him in writing as soon as possible.

Green Rebate

5. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the reasons why tenants, who are renting Housing Executive properties, and who meet the criteria to apply for a green rebate on their rates are excluded from doing so. (AQO 890/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As Members are aware, the consultation on the detail of the intended policy ended on 26 September. Officials briefed the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the outcome of the process on 8 October, and they are considering the responses to the consultation and the Committee's views, which include members' comments on the issue, before deciding on the way forward. I will announce the final shape of the scheme shortly. The details will also be set out and published as part of the consultation report on all the remaining policy

issues that emerged from the Executive's rating review last year.

I understand the Member's concerns, and I, too, would be concerned if the policy were to disadvantage anyone, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the recent huge rises in fuel prices, will the Minister consider offering a green-loan scheme to people in low-income households who cannot afford to pay upfront for energy-efficiency measures?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hear what the Member is saying, and that issue arose during the Committee's deliberations. Ultimately, fuel-poverty issues are matters for the Department for Social Development, but the ministerial subgroup will also examine them.

With regard to rates relief, we are trying to encourage improvements to the energy efficiency of housing stock, but I will take on board what the Member said. The purpose of the consultation is to try to complement the Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) cashback scheme and to supplement and complement the DSD warm homes scheme. For instance, if someone on a low income comes forward, the Energy Saving Trust will advise them on the appropriate way to proceed with insulation and energy-efficiency measures. The trust will steer people in the right direction. It may be appropriate for them to apply to the warm homes scheme, which is aimed at people who are on lower incomes. However, if they are not eligible for that scheme, they will be advised to go in the direction of the NIE cashback scheme or the rates-rebate scheme.

Therefore, it may be more appropriate for people on low incomes to apply for the warm homes scheme. Only if they are ineligible for that scheme, which is aimed at those on low incomes, will they be advised to seek assistance through the NIE cashback scheme or the rates-rebate scheme.

The issue must be considered in the round. However, the real purpose of the rates relief in question is to improve the condition of the housing stock. Fuel poverty is a matter for the Department for Social Development, but it is a very important issue that we should address.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Gardiner to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Gardiner: I do not wish to ask a supplementary question on that topic, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

Higher Energy Costs

6. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the budgetary pressures arising from higher energy costs. (AQO 883/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: On 29 January, the Assembly approved the programme of

expenditure proposals for 2008-09 to 2010-2011, as set out in the Budget document that was laid before the Assembly on 22 January. Those spending plans reflected the position at that time, including expected cost pressures, and will be subject to ongoing review as more up-to-date information becomes available and further pressures, if any, emerge.

In particular, as part of the in-year monitoring process, Departments will be able to put forward proposals to manage emerging pressures from within their existing resources. They will also have the opportunity to submit bids to my Department for additional resources if they are unable to manage the pressure within their overall allocation.

During the September monitoring round, two Departments submitted spending bids that were directly related to rising energy costs. However, it is expected that the falling cost of crude oil will shortly be reflected in utility costs, with the result that those pressures should be reduced.

Mrs Long: The Minister mentioned that two Departments had included higher energy costs in their September monitoring round responses. Will he tell the House which Departments did that, and whether the bids were met? I seek assurance about that because, for example, in the health or education sectors, where energy costs may have a direct impact on the level of service that can be provided, services might be cut if such costs are not met through the in-year monitoring rounds.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can inform the Member that, as part of the September monitoring round, the Department of Education submitted a bid, as it had in June. The Department for Regional Development submitted a bid for some £2.3 million with respect to increasing the public-lighting energy tariff. There were no other bids from other Departments in respect of energy costs.

I understand what the Member said about the impact of those costs. However, when the Budget was agreed in January, crude oil cost about \$95 a barrel. The current price is about \$60 a barrel. That is a significant drop of almost 40%. Therefore, although there is a lag between the price of crude oil and the price that is passed on to the customer — and we wish to ensure that lower crude oil prices translate into lower utility bills for businesses, Departments, Government and individuals — there is no doubt that that reduction in the price should relieve the burden considerably in future.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister agree that, bearing in mind that the question was about energy and that there have been many references to fuel poverty, including from Members opposite, it stresses that it is imperative that the Executive should meet to take decisions on tackling fuel poverty?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises an extremely important point. He and other Members will recognise the measures that have already been taken by the Executive in relation to fuel poverty issues, not least the freeze in regional rates over the next three years, the deferral of water charges, the cap on manufacturing and business rates, and the fact that householders in Northern Ireland will be £1,000 better off over the comprehensive spending review period than they would have had direct rule continued.

However, more must be done. The Minister for Social Development and others have highlighted, rightly, the need to push the energy companies, as well as simply looking to Government. However, the Executive must meet to take decisions on such matters.

It is absolutely intolerable and unacceptable that, given those issues and wider economic issues, one party is not prepared to come to the Executive and give priority to those issues. The First Minister's offer of an Executive meeting tomorrow with an open agenda means that this issue, along with many others, could be discussed straight away. There is no excuse for holding back on this or any other issue.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In recent times, there has been much media talk of the need for the Executive to meet, particularly on the subject of fuel poverty, and proposals have been made by the Department for Social Development. Have those proposals been fully costed, and is the Department of Finance and Personnel in a position to provide the finance for them?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Several suggestions and proposals have been made. One of the reasons for the decision to set up a ministerial subgroup was to ensure that all the issues were examined in detail and to determine the best and most effective response by the Executive to the issue of higher energy prices. Not the least of those issues was the fact that we need to talk to the energy companies in order to discover how to target those who need help, possibly through some form of fuel credit. There are other issues to discuss as well. However, we are not yet in a position to allocate resources to a fuel credit scheme, because any such credit could not be paid before March 2009 in any case. Work must be done on identifying those who might be eligible and on the processes by which such payments could be made. In the discussions that took place with the energy suppliers, it became clear that such payments could not be made any earlier than the March 2009 utility bills.

Work still has to be done, and progress has to be made. The ministerial subgroup is working on those issues, but there will come a point when they will have to be presented to the Executive for a decision. At that stage, all Ministers will have to decide, given the need

to provide resources to such a plan, the areas on which less money will be spent by their respective Departments. I reiterate that money to be spent on new proposals must be found from allocations that have already been made. That will require an Executive meeting and an Executive decision. I cannot take that decision; nor can any other individual Minister.

HR Connect

7. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made on HR Connect. (AQO 819/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: HR Connect will modernise the personnel function throughout the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Northern Ireland Office. It will replace outdated IT systems, modernise personnel processes through greater use of self-service facilities by staff, and provide centralised support services from a shared-service centre.

The shared-service centre has been set up, and is fully staffed and operational. The first HR Connect external recruitment exercise was launched in October 2007, and was followed by the phased release of employee relations in HR services between mid-November 2007 and the end of January 2008. Work on the remaining HR Connect services is progressing well.

Ms McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. To what extent have staff been prepared for HR Connect? Can the Minister allay any concerns that staff may have about the security of sensitive data?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for her question. Both issues are of concern to staff. There has been full communication with the trade union side as part of the implementation of such a major programme. Training in communication has also been undertaken in order to prepare staff in the new services.

Data security is a very important issue, which I and my officials take very seriously. The Civil Service accreditation panel, which is the body that scrutinises new IT systems and determines whether they meet Government standards, reviews and approves the physical and technical security measures that are in place for HR Connect. Those measures have been subjected to rigorous testing.

Competition Analysis Board

9. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will set up a competition analysis board, with an obligation to issue annual reports, on the model of the National Competitiveness Council in the Republic

of Ireland, as recommended by Sir David Varney. (AQO 924/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can see that the Member is probably as surprised as I am that we have reached this stage. *[Laughter]*. I think that question 8 has been transferred to another Department, given that it concerns a matter that is the responsibility of OFMDFM.

Sir David Varney recommended that a competition analysis board be established in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Although I appreciate the reasons for that recommendation, it should be noted that much of the work that has been published by the National Competitiveness Council in the Republic has already been produced in the Executive. However, I will look at how that information is made available and presented to the public.

4.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

The Disappeared

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the suffering of families of the disappeared; believes that there has not been full disclosure on this issue; and calls on any individual or organisation with information which may lead to the remains of the disappeared being returned to their loved ones for dignified burial, to bring forward that information without any further delay — *[Mr D Bradley.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we resume the debate, I wish to make Members aware that I have some concerns about comments that were made earlier in the debate. I will consider the Official Report, and I may return to the matter in due course.

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge the motion and the remarks that Dominic Bradley made when moving it. His comments were characterised by compassion and dignity. That is inevitable, given that the families of the disappeared have displayed those qualities over the many years since the deaths of their loved ones.

It must be remembered that the recovery of the bodies of the disappeared is an essential part of any truth process. Indeed, in some parts of the world, it constitutes the essence of a truth process. If one considers what is happening in Chile and in other Latin American countries, or what has been happening in Spain over the past two or three weeks as a consequence of the civil war there, the issue of the recovery of the bodies of those killed — or the disappeared — can never be laid to rest. It must always be part of the truth process of any society that is emerging from conflict.

Therefore, as we await the Eames/Bradley group's report, which may be published before Christmas, it is important that that group understands that, in respect of the recovery of the bodies of the disappeared — or of any other matter concerning the interests and needs of victims and survivors — there cannot be any arbitrary deadline after which no further work can be done. The Eames/Bradley group must recommend that, in respect of those matters, no such deadline is appropriate. The group must, therefore, recommend that time must be allowed for all such matters to be resolved, if at all possible.

The value of the motion is that the issue of the bodies of the disappeared is part of the wider narrative of what illegal terror organisations visited upon the people of Northern Ireland. In this case, that is the nationalist community of Northern Ireland, given that all those who were killed came from the Catholic tradition.

Given that the Eames/Bradley group is about to publish its report, I trust that that will record the narrative of what so-called republican organisations visited upon the nationalist community, including the issue of the disappeared. In its statement before the summer, the Eames/Bradley group was silent about what illegal terror organisations from the nationalist tradition visited upon the nationalist community, not least in respect of the bodies of the disappeared.

As I said, that was part of the terror that was visited upon the nationalist community by the IRA and others over the years of conflict. As we know, and as Dominic Bradley and others stated, 14 people were killed — 10 claimed by the IRA and one by the INLA.

As we speak, the disappearance of three of the bodies has not been attributed to any illegal organisation. Therefore, I listened closely to Gerry Adams as he outlined how he believed that the IRA had co-operated with the commission in respect of the bodies of the disappeared.

Although the disappearance of three of the bodies has not been attributed to any organisation, it is the belief and conviction of those three families that those individuals were taken away and murdered by the IRA. Therefore, the IRA has a responsibility to revisit and reassess the issue to determine whether that was done unilaterally or independently and whether those deaths were authorised or unauthorised. Was the IRA responsible for the deaths of those three people who are missing and whose disappearance has not yet been attributed to any one person or organisation?

The motion touches upon a broader issue; disclosure must be the cornerstone of any healing and any truth in respect of the past. Debates have taken place in the Chamber on the Police Ombudsman's report into the investigation into the death of Raymond McCord Jnr and on the secret investigation into MI5 intelligence on the Omagh bombing. Those issues, the MOD's obstruction of the Historical Enquiries Team's investigation of British Army killings, and the McCartney murder show that, without disclosure, we will not be able to deal with the past and we will not be able to move forward on a wholesale basis.

Mr Poots: I welcome the opportunity to debate this important matter. During the Troubles, families who lost innocent loved ones had a great wrong done to them; but those whose loved ones disappeared suffered a double loss. They came home one evening and their loved one was not there, and they were not there the following evening, or the following week or month, resulting in the slow realisation that their loved one was not coming home. Those families had to accept the fact that the one whom they loved and cared for would no longer be part of their family.

There was no doctor's certificate or coroner's report; there was no body, funeral service or graveyard committal. Those families had nothing; they were left with emptiness. In that respect, the loss that those families suffered superseded the loss that other people suffered during the Troubles. In many cases, people were able to identify what had happened and how it had happened, and they learned to cope with what had happened to their loved ones. The families of the disappeared did not have that to hold on to.

Therefore, we have a duty to ensure that those people and their families get justice. I have met people whose relatives were among the disappeared. I welcome the fact that the Assembly is discussing the matter today and that we can lay out our support for the families of the disappeared. I expect that the motion will receive unanimous support in the Chamber.

Some people can do a bit more than simply say that the families of the disappeared should receive the remains of their loved ones, and no stone should remain unturned in doing that. I do not know whether everything that can be done has been done, but I doubt it. The IRA was one of the main perpetrators of the wrongs that took place against the disappeared. Given the political process in which we are engaged, it is incumbent upon Sinn Féin, which is so closely linked with the IRA, to ensure that all is done to get those remains returned to their loved ones.

The families have acted with great dignity throughout the adversity that they have faced. They have not targeted Sinn Féin in a political way. Rather, they have simply sought what is rightfully theirs — the return of the remains of their loved ones.

I implore Members of Sinn Féin in particular to do everything within their power to ensure that that great wrong is put right, and that the families of the disappeared receive the remains of their loved ones as soon as physically possible.

Mr A Maginness: I thank all those Members who spoke during the debate. It has been a solemn debate, as Mr Kennedy said, but a worthwhile one, because it highlighted a particularly painful issue, and one that should be a matter of great public concern to everyone.

Dominic Bradley should be congratulated for tabling the motion. His speech reflected the concern of many, although perhaps not all, Members that the matter is dealt with in a compassionate way. The motion promotes the ultimate goal of the families of the disappeared, which is to have the remains of their loved ones returned. That is the important aspect of the motion. It is not about scoring political points, but about promoting the objective of bringing home the remains of loved ones who were victims of paramilitary and terrorist violence.

Mr Bradley should be commended for asking for restraint in the debate, and for the concerns and feelings

of the families to be taken into consideration. It is important to remember that the families want closure. They do not want to be part and parcel of a political debate, no matter how tempting that may seem to some Members. The families want closure; that is their objective, and that is why they would, in general terms, be supportive of the motion. They have waited and suffered for a long time. It is clear from most contributions to the debate that most Members share that view, and want to see an end to the families' suffering.

Allegations were made and refuted in the House. However, it is not my place to comment on those, other than to say that they were raised, and were refuted, and we move on.

The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains has a responsible and important role. It has been given the technological resources and expertise in order to locate the remains of people. It is important that that process continues. I share Mr Bradley's anxiety when he says that the commission is halfway through its mandate, and if it does not succeed during the latter part, that mandate should be renewed until there is a clear end to the suffering of the relatives. It is important that we show solidarity with the families, and, in a collective way, as many Members on all sides of the House have done, plead with people who have information to bring it to the authorities and, in particular, to the commission.

There are many ways to bring that information forward. The best way is to go directly to the lawful authorities and the commission and to apprise them of the information. As some Members said, that information may seem trivial or unimportant, but it may well be of great importance when properly analysed by those who have the expertise to make that analysis.

4.15 pm

The commission continues its work, and has a dedicated team. It is very important that those families are not forgotten, and that the resources are available for them and for their friends and relatives. I agree with Dr Stephen Farry that, with regard to the Richter scale of violence and evil perpetrated in our society, this is very near to the top, if not at the top, because of the evil nature of the deeds. For Jean McConville, for example, to be taken from her children and murdered was a foul deed, and one that cries to the very heavens for justice. How any organisation could justify that defies logic and ordinary justice.

As Tom Elliott said, it is important that we continue to support those families in their search. It is heartening for them that there has been so much support coming from all sides of the House. I hope that that support will continue over and beyond this debate, because we sometimes come to the House and make grand statements and then forget about them and move on. We should

not forget those families. We should not move on. We must continue to apply public pressure where necessary and where it can be effective, and to encourage people to bring forward information.

As Alex Attwood said, it is important that disclosure must be the cornerstone of any process of truth-finding. It is incumbent on all parties involved in our society and in the conflict that took place that they commit themselves to the process of disclosure. Everyone contributed to the debate in a spirit which, I hope, was meant to facilitate the families. That spirit must be retained. It is important that we move on and try to bring some closure to those families who have suffered so much for too long.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the suffering of families of the disappeared; believes that there has not been full disclosure on this issue; and calls on any individual or organisation with information which may lead to the remains of the disappeared being returned to their loved ones for dignified burial, to bring forward that information without any further delay.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Maintenance of Waterways by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Upper Bann Constituency

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have approximately 10 minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: From the earliest times, rivers have been a focal point for human activity. Man settled close to rivers and became dependent on them for survival. Rivers formed a working part of both the rural and urban industrial landscapes. Although there are many benefits to living adjacent to rivers, there can be many disadvantages, particularly the risk of flooding. The effects of flooding can be devastating: roads closed; homes and farms severely damaged; and public services, industry and commerce disrupted. Communities suffer from fear, anxiety and hardships during periods of flooding.

I witnessed such events in August, in Lurgan, Craigavon and Banbridge where there was extensive flooding, and many homes were damaged.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is the statutory drainage and flood-protection authority for Northern Ireland. Under the terms of the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973, the Department has discretionary powers to maintain watercourses and sea defences, which have been designated by the Drainage Council for Northern Ireland; construct and maintain drainage and flood-defence structures; and administer advisory and enforcement procedures to protect the drainage function of all watercourses.

All executive functions that arise from the Department's statutory remit under the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 are undertaken by the Rivers Agency, which also exercises the Department's responsibilities for the regulation of the water levels in Lough Neagh. In exercising its functions, the agency is required to adhere to the Department's countryside management strategy.

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

The Drainage Council for Northern Ireland is a non-departmental public body constituted under the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973. The council has a general scrutiny role in relation to the Department's

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drainage functions and has a statutory duty to ensure uniformity in the treatment of drainage throughout Northern Ireland.

I have outlined DARD's responsibilities with regard to the maintenance of watercourses and to drainage because of the colossal failure in the management of watercourses in Upper Bann. Although the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is a statutory consultee on planning issues, many homes at Knockramer Meadows in Craigavon were destroyed when a river burst its banks in the August floods. People are still coping with the consequences of that, and one wonders what DARD's response was to the planning application for those homes. We have not yet heard how DARD will remedy with the developer the ongoing problem and allay the fears of residents in that area. No wall was built to protect those homes from the river.

I accept that DARD does not hold all the responsibility, but that is part of the problem. In addition to DARD, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development have responsibility. As we saw in the summer floods, that is very confusing for people.

I have just seen the Minister in the Chamber — I congratulate her on the birth of her child and thank her for taking the time to come to the debate.

One problem that constituents find is that there is no one-stop shop, and people do not know who to contact if there is a problem. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility for emergency planning — thankfully, that is fairly new and has not been exercised. As the Minister knows, there were several problems in the recent floods. Therefore, in addition to the three Departments, local councils have responsibility.

While I was doing some research for the debate, I discovered that responsibility for a blocked watercourse is dependent on whether the water is flowing. If the water is flowing, the local council's environmental health services should be contacted, and if it is blocked, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is responsible. In any other cases, the Rivers Agency is responsible. If a concerned member of the public shows some civic responsibility and makes a phone call about a block in a watercourse, he or she should only have to ring one number. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that and consult with her ministerial colleagues on it.

As the Minister knows, the River Bann and the River Lagan run through the Upper Bann constituency. The southern shores of Lough Neagh also form part of my constituency. Those are areas of special scientific interest.

There are also wetlands close to where I live. Part of the problem is that there does not appear to be any routine, regular maintenance or checking of culverts in the area. In June, one of those culverts collapsed. As a result, part of a road caved in. In such a rural area, where there are no public sewerage works, watercourses are the

drainage outlets for septic tanks. That created a backlog that drained into the fields and wetlands. Therefore, not only did the area experience excessive rainfall during that time, but a foul odour persisted as a result.

Members of the public who wanted to report that collapsed culvert did not know which agency to ring. They rang Roads Service, but were passed from one Department to another. That is a huge problem. Regular, routine maintenance and checking of culverts is needed. I accept that a lot of drains are many years old. In the north Lurgan area, foul-water drains and storm drains run into the same sewage-treatment system. Whether or not that is the Department for Regional Development's responsibility, it has an impact on the watercourse, for which DARD has oversight. I want my constituency's natural heritage, particularly the wetlands and areas of special scientific interest, to be protected, not only for the well-being of people who live in the area, but to preserve the countryside's flora and fauna.

There is always great debate about the role of farmers in watercourse maintenance. Often, farmers are blamed for pollution; sometimes, rightly so. In recent years, there has been discussion about the level of phosphates being spread on fields. Although there is great compliance with the nitrates directive, there is a problem with the use of phosphates. It is actually less expensive for farmers to use more natural methods and to reduce the level of fertiliser that they spread on their fields. I am not sure whether the Minister has taken action on that issue, although I believe that a pilot project was to be undertaken.

Work must also be done on the European water framework directive. The Minister's Department is carrying out flood mapping of all the counties in the North. I understand that in the Republic of Ireland, a much more extensive flood-mapping project is being carried out. That ties in with DARD's role as a consultee in planning matters. Can the Minister explain how people who want to buy houses will be protected and how developers who wish to buy land and apply for planning permission will be able to gain access to those flood maps? Will they be charged for that access?

The difficulties that arise from the cross-cutting nature of watercourse management across several agencies are not only experienced by the public; I am sure that the Minister's colleagues also encounter them when trying to research who has responsibility for certain matters. In the past few months, when extensive flooding occurred in my constituency, part of the problem lay with Rivers Agency. People in one part of my constituency had to report to the Lisburn office, and people in the other part to the office in Armagh. That creates difficulties, even for the local council's emergency planning. During the flooding, some sandbags had to come from Lisburn, and some from elsewhere. Advice on what to

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do in the event of an emergency must be provided from a central location.

I remember that when I was a little girl, the “Ministry men” took care of watercourse management. They used to come out regularly and clean the drains and bogs. Every year, I would have seen them working. That is not the case any longer. Can the Minister indicate whether the budget for that work has been maintained and how the situation will be remedied? There has been a great deficit in investment in infrastructure and maintenance of waterways throughout Northern Ireland, particularly in my constituency.

4.30 pm

The amount of pollution caused by the non-compliance of sewage treatment works in Upper Bann, particularly in the Closet River around Craigavon, is a matter of great concern. The Minister is aware that Lough Neagh is the main reservoir of drinking water for Belfast and greater Belfast. However, the poor management of watercourses and the poor quality of rivers and streams cause Lough Neagh’s water quality to fall well below the standards required by European directives. What action is the Minister taking, or prepared to take, over the next two to five years to improve the environment and the quality of the water for those who drink it?

Mr O’Dowd: I congratulate the Minister on the birth of her daughter, Aoise Geraldine. I am sure that she and her husband are very proud. I met the Minister’s mother the other day, and she is an extremely proud grandmother. I thank the Minister for attending today to respond to questions raised in the debate.

I thank Mrs Kelly for securing today’s debate. It is timely because, as recently as 21 October 2008, the Assembly discussed promoting Lough Neagh as a tourist attraction. However, any problems with the waterways that flow into Lough Neagh will prevent it developing to its full potential. Other Members raised several issues, and I have no doubt that those wishing to speak will raise further matters.

On 16 August 2008, the Halfpenny River caused severe flooding in the Knockramer Meadows area of Lurgan, and that must be investigated. I thank the Rivers Agency for its prompt action and for twice meeting local residents in the aftermath of the flood. The agency carefully explained to residents the processes involved in a long-term flood defence for that river, and it committed to regular patrolling of the river to ensure that large objects are not blocking culverts, because that seems to have been one of the causes of the severe flooding.

Mrs Kelly is correct that questions must be asked: why were flood defences not built in the first place to protect the developments along the Halfpenny River, and why did the Planning Service allow those

developments to proceed? I welcome the fact that the Rivers Agency is now closely examining that matter.

The Closet River was mentioned during the Assembly’s debate on Lough Neagh. It also concerns not only environmentalists but local farmers whose land surrounds it. Although the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not have direct responsibility for the river, the sewage that is being pumped into the river overflows onto farmers’ land and has caused severe pollution in the past. In future developments at the waterworks, I hope that the Environment Agency in particular will keep its promise that discharges will not contain the raw sewage that was previously discharged on farmers’ land. I hope that that process will stop, but only time will tell.

Those who live in the Craigavon area of Upper Bann are in a strange position because the River Bann divides it. When the Rivers Agency responded to the recent flooding, some people had to report to Lisburn and others to Portadown, yet they come from areas that are close together. After the flooding at Knockramer, it would have been far easier for residents to go to Portadown than to Lisburn, although I understand that the Portadown depot provided sandbags for the area and assisted in dealing with the flooding.

I also thank the “Ministry men”, as Mrs Kelly called them, who turned up in Knockramer late in the evening and started to clear culverts, and so forth. After a long and miserable day, they came to carry out work, and their arrival was welcome. The watercourses in Upper Bann require attention, as do those across the North. However, those in that area require particular attention because they flow into Lough Neagh. The lough is a major water supplier and a sizeable nature reserve, and, as was discussed in the House two weeks ago, it has much tourist potential that must be fulfilled.

I mentioned the River Halfpenny and River Closet. We must learn from past experiences of planning developments close to rivers. In August 2008, the River Halfpenny, which is, usually, merely a stream, became a raging torrent within hours.

Mr Gardiner: I congratulate the Minister on the birth of her baby daughter.

I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council, which has interest in the surrounding areas of Lough Neagh.

I want to raise several issues about the management of the Upper Bann, and the Lough Neagh basin into which the River Bann flows. The Upper Bann waterway system and the entire Lough Neagh basin is one of the great underdeveloped tourist and recreation resources in the Province, and the lack of a single co-ordinating authority contributes to the problem. On several occasions, I have put on record my support for the creation of a Lough Neagh authority, which would expand the area’s

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tourist potential and assume responsibility for the management of all the waters in the region.

The fragmentation, which currently exists, does not provide a good basis for progress. We require an executive body that is directly accountable to the Assembly through one of the Departments, rather than one that merely facilitates co-ordination. For some time I have been concerned that the apportionment of responsibilities to existing Departments is incorrect. For example, it is strange that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has responsibility for flooding: it would be more logical for the Department of the Environment to handle that matter. Also, responses to flooding would be better if managed by one Department. In addition, the region's tourism falls under the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Regardless of the way in which one approaches the matter, there are several ministries involved in the management of different aspects of the Upper Bann and the Lough Neagh basin. That is why the introduction of an overarching body to manage the region makes sense and will keep local — as opposed to ministerial — executive responsibility in one place. Furthermore, it might enable the injection of energy, which is, inevitably, lacking when there are several Northern Ireland Departments managing one particular issue. Too much time is consumed by co-ordination and not enough time is spent on the directional energy needed to improve the region.

There is a pattern of increasing recreation and tourism in the region based around honeypot sites such as Kinnego Marina. In addition, the Upper Bann has important fishing grounds. However, there is no statutory navigation authority for Lough Neagh, the River Blackwater and the Upper Bann. A number of local councils enforce rules and regulations in the vicinity of the marinas and facilities around Lough Neagh.

The bed and soil of Lough Neagh are owned by the Shaftesbury Estate. Therefore, many infrastructural developments on the lough — such as piers, jetties and navigational markers — cannot commence without the owner's agreement. The Rivers Agency and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development exercise a statutory rule to regulate Lough Neagh's water levels, taking account of weather conditions and the needs of a wide range of users including boating, farming, fisheries and conservation groups. We need rationalisation of the confusion of authority, rights and operational methods.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council, and I commend my fellow Member from Upper Bann Mrs Kelly for securing the Adjournment debate.

Furthermore, I congratulate the Minister on the birth of her daughter. It is nice to see her back, and we look

forward to seeing her in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Upper Bann has some of the most scenic waterways in the Province. Although colleagues from South Antrim may have something to say about it, the tourism potential of Lough Neagh is massive and untapped. Only last Tuesday, the House debated that issue. Upper Bann's waterways could prove valuable to the local economy. We need assurances from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that the waterways will be maintained to a high standard so that we can realise their tourist potential.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, however, is not solely responsible for all that is wrong with Upper Bann's waterways; there are major issues with the quality of water pumped into our rivers and into Lough Neagh. The pollution in and around the Ballynacor treatment works is an absolute disgrace: I have raised that matter with the Minister for Regional Development. Mrs Kelly mentioned the lack of joined-up Government in this respect. I will not repeat what she and others have said, but Northern Ireland Water continues to investigate serious issues in connection with the Closet River. Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles, but at this rate of pollution the water will not remain fresh for much longer. Drastic action must be taken.

Mr O'Dowd referred to another local issue that is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. On Saturday 16 August, Northern Ireland was subjected to a massive deluge — a once-in-a-100-year storm, the weather experts tell us. On that day, the Rivers Bann and Lagan and all the main rivers in the area overflowed, damaging potato crops and cereals. An answer to a question that I received today from the Minister states that the estimated damage to farms in the Upper Bann constituency alone, based on input costs, is £97,000 in respect of potatoes and £66,000 in respect of cereals. No one can do much about the storm; that is something over which we have no control. However, I call upon the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to clarify urgently whether compensation will be paid to the farmers affected.

I urge that consideration be given to the creation of a single body to administer, maintain and promote the waterways of the Upper Bann constituency, and I call on the Executive to give that matter urgent consideration. The tourist and economic potential of Lough Neagh needs vision and imagination if it is to develop. If we are serious about caring for future generations, we must use all the potential at our disposal.

I stress to the Minister, however, that before anything else is done, we must eliminate the flow of undesirable stuff into Lough Neagh — and I express myself as mildly as possible. I ask the Minister to address those

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issues; knowing her and her Department, they will be taken seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I, too, add my congratulations to the Minister and wish her family every blessing for the future.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat. I am grateful to everyone for their kind words and comments. I thank Dolores for giving the Assembly an opportunity to discuss waterway maintenance in the Upper Bann constituency. I have not quite returned to work, so you will not see me in Committee for a while yet, George. I returned to the House for this debate because I believe that it is important; but I will be off work for a wee while and for that, I ask Members to bear with me. I thank other Members for their kind words and their contributions to the debate: John O'Dowd, Sam Gardiner and George Savage.

I recognise the strategic importance of Lough Neagh, and its importance for tourism. Even though the weather was not great, my family spent a few lovely days this year enjoying the amenities at Kinnegoe Embankment. We had a great time.

4.45 pm

I recognise that the wetlands of Lough Neagh are environmentally important, and I recognise that the lough is important to the local area. I am also a very keen advocate of the restoration of the Ulster Canal, which links Lough Neagh to the River Blackwater, the Shannon-Erne waterway and Lough Erne. I have been working on that from a constituency basis, and I recognise that it would open up Lough Neagh's potential. It is also important that the infrastructure be right.

I recognise that the farming community and the public have very real concerns about watercourse maintenance, in view of the serious flooding events of 16 and 17 August. I am conscious that the Upper Bann constituency unfortunately experienced severe flooding at that time. I emphasise that the events in August were exceptional and exceeded the design standards of drainage infrastructure at many locations. However, having seen the effects of the flooding, I very strongly sympathise with those who were affected. It is very traumatic to have one's home, business or farm flooded.

Government provided funds for district councils to make emergency payments to householders who suffered losses, and I am aware that farmers in Upper Bann suffered crop losses, as George Savage pointed out. The assessment of the losses to the farming industry in the North is now complete, and it is evident that potato growers suffered the greatest losses due to the very high crop-input costs and the susceptibility of the crop to flooding. My officials are discussing that issue with the Department of Finance and Personnel, and I will follow that up at ministerial level in the next few days. I hope to be able to clarify the position shortly.

My proposals will be similar to the de minimis payment scheme. Potato growers who suffered because of the flooding incident will receive payments of up to €7,500. Any payments will take losses incurred by individual growers into account. Hopefully, we will have a response on that in the near future.

In the meantime, the Rivers Agency continues to investigate flooding incidence and the scope for remedial action. It has already carried out immediate critical repairs to major flood defences, and I am conscious that questions were raised about maintenance issues. Throughout the North of Ireland, the Rivers Agency currently maintains approximately 6,800 km of designated watercourses and associated flood defences, which largely provide protection to built property.

The agency carries out a cyclical programme of inspection and maintenance of designated watercourses to ensure free flow. In response to severe weather warnings, the agency increases inspection and maintenance of grilles at vulnerable locations where obstructions are likely to impede flow and increase flood risk. That maintenance work has an essential flood-management focus.

I also commend the staff of the Rivers Agency, whom I have seen out working during events like the August floods to which I referred. Even at weekends, they go to work when they are needed and it is all hands on deck. They work very hard to prevent homes and businesses from being flooded, although that is not always possible.

To put it into context, the Rivers Agency does not have a legislative remit to carry out maintenance on watercourses purely for amenity or aesthetic purposes. The agency will only intervene where bank erosion threatens flood defences, roads or built property. That is all that the agency can do legally. Adjacent landowners have a responsibility to maintain undesignated watercourses. The Rivers Agency has an advisory and enforcement role in protecting the drainage function of all watercourses for flood-management purposes.

When Government recently responded to a review of flood-management policy, we took account of representations from the farming community about rural watercourse maintenance. The Rivers Agency continues to maintain designated watercourses in the interests of drainage and flood management. That work must be carried out in an environmentally sensitive manner in order to satisfy the principles of sustainability and EU obligations. There are many EU directives with which we must comply. The work must be done in an environmentally sensitive way — a point that was made by Mrs Dolores Kelly.

There is no evidence to suggest that a lack of maintenance of designated watercourses contributed significantly to the flooding in August.

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I assure Members that Rivers Agency will investigate all watercourse-related flooding incidents, as well as the scope that exists for remedial action to be taken, including maintenance of those watercourses that have been mentioned in the debate, such as the Halfpenny River.

Proactive flood-risk management is proposed in the Government response to the flood-management policy review, and we will take full account of the needs of watercourse maintenance and the concerns expressed during the debate. I accept Mr Gardiner's frustration that some of the flood-management responsibilities are split among different Departments, and we must assess how those issues are managed. My Department will work closely with Department of the Environment and Department for Regional Development officials to try to bring a joined-up-government approach to bear.

Mrs Kelly asked about an incident line, and I can confirm that a number to be called in the event of flooding will be introduced before the end of the year. That number will be: 0300 2000 100. Press releases will be issued and other publicity undertaken when that number comes into operation. The advantage of that number is that the people who will take the calls will know to which agencies to direct the information, and that will ensure that problems are dealt with as quickly as possible.

My Department will tomorrow launch the strategic flood maps, which will be free and available online. The maps are very professional — I saw them in advance, and I am pleased with the Rivers Agency's work on them. The flood maps will be freely available in the next few days, and I am keen that statutory agencies and other people use them to try to avoid repeating past mistakes.

If I have not responded to any local maintenance issues that were raised, I am happy for the Rivers Agency to respond individually about those. I thank those Members who participated in the debate for creating an opportunity to discuss flood issues in Upper Bann. My Department wants to continue working with representatives of that constituency — as we do with all constituencies — to try to alleviate the misery of flooding and some of the associated problems. We accept that we cannot sort out every problem, but we will do everything within the legislative framework to try to avoid flood incidents. Go raibh maith agat.

Adjourned at 4.52 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 4 November 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: During yesterday's sitting, I indicated on several occasions that I had some concerns about remarks that were made during the debate about the disappeared. Having reflected on what Mr McCausland said and having taken counsel on the matter, I believe that direct and unsubstantiated allegations of criminal behaviour were made about another Member. Those allegations were very clearly denied and refuted in the House by the Member concerned, Mr Adams. I regard the remarks to have been unparliamentary, and I call on Mr McCausland to withdraw them.

Mr McCausland: My comments about the Member for West Belfast were based on extracts from Ed Moloney's book, 'A Secret History of the IRA', which is available in bookshops and in the Assembly Library. Therefore, I will not withdraw my remarks. Given that Mr Adams continually calls for truth recovery, it is important that we get to the truth about those matters.

Mr Speaker: The Member should take his seat. Given that the Member has not withdrawn his remarks, I order him, under Standing Order 65, to withdraw immediately from the Chamber and its precincts for the remainder of today's sitting.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: As I have said repeatedly in the House, it gives me no pleasure to come here and make rulings on such matters. Yesterday, in particular, I reminded Members repeatedly to be careful in what they said and not to make serious allegations about other Members. I ask Members to bear in mind the dignity of this institution and the Assembly when they are speaking during debates in the House.

Reviewing yesterday's Hansard report, I noticed that not all remarks in languages other than English were translated. Another thing that I have continually said in this House is that whatever language Members want to speak in, it is vital that they then translate it into

English. Unfortunately, however, that does not always happen, and I remind the House of that requirement.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have raised the matter of a Member's failure to interpret comments that were made in the Irish language into English. I have been informed that the comments were not translated because they were so defamatory of the individual about whom the Member was speaking and could have been perceived as unparliamentary. Will you make a further ruling and request that the Member concerned withdraws the comments, in which he called another Member a fool and used another derogatory term that I am not permitted to repeat in the Chamber? Will you ask that those comments are interpreted fully and make a ruling on whether Mr Adams ought to withdraw his derogatory comments against a Member from my party?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure the House that I have looked at the Hansard report, and I have taken counsel. The remarks that Mr Adams made yesterday were not unparliamentary.

Mr McLaughlin: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. That interesting intervention by Mr Paisley Jnr is a powerful argument for the introduction of an Irish language Act. That would allow all Members of the House — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us proceed.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

I am delighted that there is such a full House for the important motion on the Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008. However, I notice that Members are leaving now.

Article 3 of the Order provides for increases in the annual salaries payable to the president and member of the Lands Tribunal for Northern Ireland with retrospective effect from 1 April 2008 following recommendations made in the thirtieth report of the Senior Salaries Review Body, which was published on 17 June 2008. On the same day, the Government, in a written ministerial statement, accepted all the main recommendations, as they are affordable and consistent with public-sector pay policy. It was confirmed that the cost of the awards would be met from the existing departmental expenditure limits.

The Lands Tribunal is a court of record established under the Lands Tribunal and Compensation Act (Northern Ireland) 1964, and its functions are varied. One of its most important functions is to resolve disputes over the amount of compensation that is to be paid for the compulsory acquisition of land or for the injury caused to land by, for instance, the building of roads. Another important function is the hearing of appeals and references concerning the valuation of land for rates relief purposes.

The tribunal must also deal with the renewal of business tenancies, consents for alterations to land, assignments and agreements to surrender and the modification of legal obligations that are, allegedly, impeding the enjoyment of land, such as rights of way. Moreover, parties can agree to ask the Lands Tribunal to sit in private as an arbitrating body to settle disputes concerning the value, use or development of a piece of land. Domestic rating appeals are also referred from the Northern Ireland Valuation Tribunal, which was established on 1 April 2007.

The tribunal consists of a president and one member, both of whom are appointed by the Lord Chancellor. Under the 1964 Act, the Department of Finance and Personnel has responsibility for appointing staff to assist the tribunal in performing its functions and for determining its remuneration. My Department also has various rule-making responsibilities in relation to the tribunal's jurisdiction and proceedings.

It is proposed that the Order will come into operation on 5 November 2008. I commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the proposals for the subordinate legislation at its meeting on 10 September, when members requested additional information on the scope and functions of the Lands Tribunal and on the proposed salary increases for the president and its member. The Minister has set out the role and functions of the tribunal, and I will not repeat what he has said.

The Committee considered the additional information from the Department of Finance and Personnel and, subsequently, the Order and the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At its meeting on 15 October, the Committee agreed unanimously to recommend to the Assembly that the Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved. Therefore, I support the motion, which seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Committee Chairperson for his remarks and for the Committee's deliberations. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Lands Tribunal (Salaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008

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

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 (Mr Weir): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Assembly.

Under section 85 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Secretary of State referred the draft Order to the Assembly for its consideration. If approved today, the Committee's report and the Hansard report of the debate will form the Assembly's response to the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office on the draft Criminal Damage Compensation Order.

Members are aware that the NIO conducted a wider consultation on the draft Order and that consultation will end on 10 November. However, the Ad Hoc Committee would expect the views of the Committee, and of the Assembly — if it approves the report — to carry considerable weight when the NIO considers responses to the wider consultation.

I am grateful to all members of the Committee for their diligent attendance and contributions to the debate, and to the Committee staff for their commitment in fulfilling our remit in such a short timescale. I also thank officials and representatives of those organisations who provided information and evidence to the Committee during the past few weeks, and I will speak further on that later.

The amended legislation will make it easier for halls that are damaged to claim statutory compensation. The current limited statutory criminal damage compensation scheme focuses on damage caused by three or more persons or by a paramilitary organisation, and the latter example may result in the issue of a Chief Constable's certificate.

Most of the halls that have been damaged in recent years have been Orange Halls and, regrettably, we have seen attacks on halls in Coagh and Pomeroy at the weekend. I acknowledge that attacks have taken place on halls on both sides of the community; some halls

have been attacked, while others have been completely destroyed. I know that all parties in the House are united in their total and unreserved condemnation of attacks on any community facilities, no matter what the community or the source of the attack.

10.45 am

In recent years, the main problem with the current legislation has been that there is sometimes no evidence to support a claim to the existing compensation scheme. Even though three or more people could have attacked a hall, no one may have seen the attack taking place, particularly as many attacks happen in isolated areas in the middle of the night. The police, therefore, have difficulty in obtaining evidence, or they may be unable to certify that the damage was the result of paramilitary activity. In those circumstances, the Compensation Agency cannot make a payment.

Attacks on halls have caused further problems for their owners because they have resulted in substantial increases in their insurance premiums. Indeed, we heard from witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee that a number of halls have no insurance cover at present. In 2007, there was an unexpected increase in the number of attacks on isolated and vulnerable Orange Halls. Fortunately, since early 2008, the number of attacks has decreased, and we hope that that trend will continue. However, the recent attacks on Coagh and Pomeroy Orange Halls are a worrying development. Hopefully, those incidents are one-offs. It is because of the difficulties that were being experienced by owners of halls in such isolated areas that Northern Ireland Office Ministers decided to add further criteria to the current compensation legislation to give eligible community halls easier access to compensation via the provisions in the draft Order.

I now turn to the Committee's work and the evidence that it received. NIO officials and staff from the Compensation Agency and the Department of Finance and Personnel were the first to brief the Committee. They gave a presentation to the Committee on the background to, and purpose of, the legislation. We deliberately invited representatives of all three organisations so that all the relevant issues could be covered.

We then heard evidence from representatives of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, the Royal Black Institution, and, finally, from representatives of the insurance industry. I must highlight the fact that representatives of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, whose halls would be covered by the legislation, were invited to appear before the Committee but decided not to give evidence — although they indicated their general contentment with the draft legislation. The Law Society of Northern Ireland declined to appear in person before the Committee, but it decided to provide

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written comments. Those were the only submissions that were made to the Committee.

I will now briefly outline the proposals. The new provisions are targeted specifically at community halls that are exempt from rates under the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, and, in particular, halls that qualify under either: article 41(2)(e) of the Order, which relates to a small number of halls or facilities that are deemed as being used for charitable purposes under the Recreational Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1958; or Article 41A of the Order, which, in effect, covers facilities belonging to one of the following organisations: — the Ancient Order of Hibernians; the Apprentice Boys; the Freemasons; the Orange and Black Institutions; the Order of the Knights of Saint Columbanus; and the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes.

In many ways, the report speaks for itself, but, in my role as Chairperson, I will highlight several aspects of it and comment briefly on them. The report focuses on a small range of issues, and the Committee was therefore able to deal with them in detail. First, the Committee did not reach consensus on the general objective of the draft legislation. Some members had reservations about whether it was the best way to tackle the problem. Other members wanted further information before reaching any conclusion. However, after consideration, the Committee agreed to give a broad welcome to the general objective of the draft Order.

Much of the debate in Committee meetings and witness sessions centred on what is known as the sunset clause, and there were differing views on it. It provides that the new arrangements would cease to apply three years after introduction, unless the provisions are renewed by the Secretary of State. The evidence that we received called for the provision to be removed. Different views were expressed at meetings, but the Committee agreed to recommend that the sunset provisions be removed from the draft Order.

I referred earlier to the problem of increased insurance premiums as a result of attacks, and the fact that some halls have no insurance cover. It is expected that the introduction of the legislation will give statutory cover for criminal damage. It is also hoped that it will inspire confidence within the insurance market and will result in all halls having proper cover.

Concerns were raised about the adequacy of the Northern Ireland Office's equality impact screening exercise. Though Members from different parties expressed a range of views on whether a full equality impact assessment was required, the Committee unanimously agreed to recommend that the Northern Ireland Office must demonstrate that the legislation was sufficiently equality proofed. The report contains other minor recommendations. However, I have outlined the main points.

I commend the report to the House, and ask Members to approve it.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the debate, and I want to indicate that I am a member of the Orange Order and the Royal Black Institution.

Every society must create a framework of laws that specifically tackle problems that are endemic in that society. Now that a general political settlement has taken place here, and has gained the stability that only years of peace can confer, we must establish powerful and strong ground rules in order to prevent lawless elements from ever dragging our society back into its disordered and violent past. That is the clear context in which the draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 is set. The draft Order is designed to tackle a problem that runs to the heart of the wider issue of damage to property, which also touches on deeply disturbing ethnic-cleansing issues, since the properties that have been damaged belong, in the main, to the Orange Order.

New laws should not apply for only one, two or three years, or have a best-before or sell-by date. If laws reflect the norms of society, those norms do not disappear when there are fewer incidents of criminal outbreaks, or, in this case, of criminal damage. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party remains strongly opposed to the legislation's so-called sunset clause, which was so favoured by the Northern Ireland Office. It is an entirely novel concept for laws to be temporary. If it is wrong to attack and burn Orange Halls one day, it is wrong tomorrow, the day after that, next week, next month and next year. It is the act that is wrong, not when it occurs. A community may not experience a murder in 100 years, but that does not mean that the sanctions against murder should be removed from the statute book.

A sanction must remain in force indefinitely, and be intrinsic to the overall law and order that the Assembly offers to society. There must be bounds beyond which an individual cannot go, and criminal damage is wrong, and remains wrong. It is not a question of removing laws as society normalises. The entire body of law, including provisions to deal with criminal damage, defines what is normal and acceptable.

Therefore, provisions to deal with criminal damage must remain in force in order to give a proper climate of insurance in which the Orange Order and others can operate. Such organisations have a human right to expect that. It would be wrong to withdraw that provision simply because someone says that we are a normal society; particularly if that someone is a politician. Ultimately, the issue is about right and wrong, not about cost. Failure to make this law permanent would reduce its power and potency, and the public perception of the seriousness of the crime.

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Criminal damage remains a live issue. Attempts were made in the past few days to destroy two Orange Halls in County Tyrone. I condemn those attacks, and appeal to the wider community to share any information that it has in order that those responsible can be made amenable.

It is for all those reasons that I support the measure that is proposed in the draft Order. Equally strongly, however, I reject the sunset clause, which is little more than the sun setting on common sense.

Mr O’Loan: Though the SDLP accepts the report of the Ad Hoc Committee, we are of the view that the remedy that is proposed in the draft Order is not the best one.

The SDLP does not think that that remedy stands up fully to equality considerations, and we believe that the proposal must undergo a full equality impact assessment. We are disappointed that the Ad Hoc Committee refused to append our submission to its report. We feel that it would have been important for our views to have been expressed and for our submission to have been accepted. We will, of course, make a direct submission to the NIO.

The measure in the draft Order is intended to ease the route to compensation, particularly after attacks on Orange Halls. We accept that the Orange Order faces a serious problem, and we acknowledge that many of its halls are vulnerable because they are in isolated rural areas. We reiterate our condemnation of such attacks and accept the validity of trying to address the problem. A significant proportion of Orange Halls have been damaged or destroyed over the years. There was a serious spate of such attacks in 2007, and Members know about the two recent attacks in County Tyrone; indeed, the Committee Chairperson and Mr Kennedy referred to those attacks.

However, I am not convinced that the draft Order is the best method of addressing the problem. It is constructed in such a way that it confers most of its benefit on Orange Halls, but we believe that a measure that is wider in scope and application is needed.

It must be noted that in its submission to the Committee, the Law Society of Northern Ireland directed the Committee to consider the draft Order with reference to statutory equality provisions. That submission refers to a duty on the state under article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights to extend to all citizens equally the rights to compensation that are granted to victims of criminal damage. The submission quotes section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which requires that a public authority has:

“due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity”.

The legal adviser to the Assembly gave similar advice. We regard each set of advice as being significant, and

we ask that Government consider carefully the full opinions of both.

Orange Halls — indeed all halls — covered by the draft Order are not the only community halls that have been, or may be, targeted for an attack or a campaign of attacks. In particular, GAA buildings have been attacked for many years. We stress that the GAA and the Orange Order are very different organisations, but they have in common a history of suffering that has been brought about by sectarian attacks that are related to wider community tensions. Other buildings, such as churches and church halls, have also been attacked. No one can predict what, if any, category of building may be attacked in the future. A mechanism is needed that treats all community buildings fairly and equally.

The approach that we favour must focus on the nature of the attack and not on the status of the building. We note that that is the approach of existing compensation legislation. Modification should remain within that framework and should relate to tests around the action that caused the criminal damage. The draft Order may not address equality issues properly, therefore leaving it vulnerable to judicial review. The best approach may be to reconsider the criteria for a Chief Constable’s certificate. That may involve introducing a simple test as to whether an attack was believed to have been sectarian in motive. The SDLP asks Government to consider the wisdom of such an approach, which would address the serious problem that the Orange Order faces but in a way that is fair to all.

Dr Farry: I join other Members in thanking the Committee Chairperson and staff for the work that they have done over the past few weeks.

My party and I look forward to these matters being both discussed and under the full control of the Assembly in the context of the devolution of policing and justice powers. Until then, there remains the rather cumbersome process of working through Ad Hoc Committees.

I may be in the unique position of being the only Member to have sat on all three criminal damage Ad Hoc Committees in recent months.

11.00 am

Mr Weir: Is the Member making a speech or an addition?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will need that extra minute in order to compensate for the heckling that I am getting.

The draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 is the most straightforward and simplest piece of legislation

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compared with the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 and the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, which have already been considered by the Ad Hoc Committee.

I join with other Members in saying that, sadly, legislation is required in this area. The weekend attacks on Orange Halls in Coagh and Pomeroy were referred to, and there have been other sectarian attacks on property in recent months and years. There has been a marked failure in the insurance system; as a consequence, it is necessary for the state to intervene. Although it is clear that the attacks are sectarian, it is difficult to prove the number of people involved, the nature of the organisation and the degree of planning by the perpetrators. Hence, the current system does not cover events that are happening now.

I share some Members' concerns about the general approach and mechanism that have been adopted to deal with the issue. That is not the cleanest way of doing things. However, given the small sums of money involved — a couple of hundred thousand pounds a year — it would be more cumbersome and expensive with regard to time and resources to do things differently. Therefore, although the draft Order is not ideal, it is, pragmatically, the best way forward. For that reason, therefore, the Alliance Party fully supports the Northern Ireland Office's suggestions.

That said, however, we have concerns. Like others, I have concerns about the sunset clause, which provides for an arbitrary cut-off time. I hope that sectarian attacks are now a thing of the past, and I would like to think that they will be something from the past in three years' time. Being realistic, however, that may not be the case. Instead of the sunset cause, I would support an open-ended process or a simpler process of renewal of legislation without having to go back to square one and drawing up legislation from scratch.

With regard to the equality impact assessment (EQIA), I have concerns about the process that has been followed up until now, which is essentially an extrapolation of the assessment done by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in relation to the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. Fundamentally, however, it is for the Northern Ireland Office to satisfy itself that it has covered the process satisfactorily. The Committee has highlighted those issues in the report's recommendations.

The purpose of EQIAs is to identify where there is differential impact from public policy. They do not act as a barrier to policies being taken forward. There will be a differential impact as a result of the legislation, and, in practice, it will benefit people from the Protestant/unionist section of the community, as most of the attacks that will fall under the legislation are attacks on Orange Halls. Therefore, I am not entirely convinced about

what a fresh EQIA will demonstrate, because policy-makers acknowledge that there is a differential impact.

Mr O'Loan: In the final advice that the Committee received from the Northern Ireland Office, it was stated that although owners of halls may be biased — if I can use that word — and more likely to be from the Protestant or unionist community, the users of Orange Halls would not be, as the halls are there for wider community benefit. I utterly reject that argument. If a proper equality impact assessment was carried out, such an argument would be seen to be absolutely unsustainable.

Dr Farry: I am sure that we will have a wider discussion on that point as the debate progresses. I wish to stress a final point in parallel to that issue: there is an issue in relation to the enforcement of the current hate crime legislation whereby sectarian attacks on people and property can be treated as aggravated offences. It is important that the Assembly highlights that that law is not being properly used and that stiffer sentences should follow for those convicted of carrying out such attacks.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I declare that I am a member of the Apprentice Boys. I thank the Committee Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, and Committee staff who have helped to compile the report.

Any attack on a community or on an identity is regarded in this society, and in legislation, as a hate crime — hatred of a people, and hatred so awful that the perpetrators seek to burn people and to exterminate them from the community. The policy of those who wish to destroy the identity of the Orange Order and the community from which it springs is akin to that of Adolf Hitler: burn it, eradicate it, remove it from the earth.

That is why legislation is in place that identifies such crimes as hate crimes, identifies ways of addressing some of that hatred and ensures that compensation is rightly paid to people who have lost so much. I welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland Office has adopted the proposal made by the Democratic Unionist Party at St Andrews and which the party had been making for years; that more, adequate, compensation measures are needed to ensure that vulnerable rural halls are properly protected and that compensation will be provided to those concerned if halls are burnt and destroyed. One cannot expect the police to guard halls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

I am glad that we have seen delivery on a key DUP objective, and that it has won support across the House, even though it is being qualified in some ways. The points made by the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan — that he does not understand that other people play roles in Orange Halls, and that, somehow, a person must be a Prod to walk through the doors of an Orange Hall — are completely erroneous. Were he

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to visit an Orange Hall in his constituency, such as the Protestant Hall in Ballymena, he would see all manner of community activities taking place, such as bowls and Irish dancing, which attract support from across the entire community.

Credit unions have a significant charitable impact on our society, and impoverished people from across the community go to Orange Halls where credit unions are based. When people go in to seek credit, no one asks them whether they are Catholics or Protestants — that is very important. The Member's points are erroneous, and he knows that.

We should accept that the idea of putting in place special legislation is important. The Committee heard critical evidence from the insurance industry, and the Committee thanked the industry for providing it. Insurance representatives told the Committee that premiums are, on average, about £945 a year and, as the report states:

“this is substantially more than the estimate for a similar-type hall in Wales, the north of England or Scotland. Premiums are also about double the amounts that church halls might expect to pay.”

However, insurance representatives acknowledged that were the draft legislation to become law:

“insurance rates for community halls would more than likely reduce.”

There is sound evidence that the premiums that must be paid for halls by those who are hard-pressed and cash-strapped will be reduced. We will see progress being made, so that community halls can be used for the benefit of everyone — and I stress everyone — in the local community.

Like other Members, I oppose the idea of the sunset clause. A simpler measure would be to allow a devolved Minister to decide whether to introduce legislation to remove that clause, rather than having a sunset clause that would be limited to three years.

A year ago, it was hoped that we had seen the last attempts at Hitlerism and attempts to exterminate Orange Halls. Just this weekend, however, as reported in today's 'News Letter', there was an attack on the Orange Hall on the Ballinderry Bridge Road in Coagh, near Cookstown. That was a disgraceful attack, which must be utterly and totally condemned. I hope that, across the House, we will hear some words of condemnation of the recent attacks.

It was very important that the Ad Hoc Committee had its deliberations. Until the Committee started to meet, there had not been any official response to the proposed legislation from some of the most widely affected groups, including the Orange Order. The Committee prompted those people to submit official responses and to drive the process forward.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I urge the Secretary of State to introduce the legislation at Westminster.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak about the proposed legislation, and I declare an interest as a member of the GAA.

It is important that the proposed legislation to deal with the attacks that have been mentioned be wide-ranging, and that it ensures that every possibility is covered, so that community halls, GAA halls and Orange Halls have the right to, and are guaranteed, compensation for the replacement of their facilities.

I condemn without question attacks on Orange Halls, and, in particular, the two recent attacks in Pomeroy and Ballinderry, in my constituency of Mid Ulster. It is important that those community halls be protected, that they be seen as a community facility and as an asset to the community, and that they should not be tampered with, attacked or destroyed. Those halls are a part of the life of our community and the variations in it. Some may not be used in a cross-community way, but they are a part of the structure of the community, and it is important that they be protected by legislation.

Nevertheless, the list of organisations and halls that would be covered by the proposed legislation leaves out GAA halls. I am told that that is because some of them are attached to social clubs that have other money coming in. In many cases, however —

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept that the proposed legislation makes it clear that certain buildings or community halls — those that have a bar — can make enough money to obtain extra insurance premiums, and that that is why the clause is there? It is not a sectarian reason.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: If the Member had waited, I could have explained that situation. I accept his point that the clause is not there for sectarian reasons or for any particular itemisation. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all GAA halls have social clubs or bars. Many of them are just changing rooms, or community halls that are used for keep-fit classes and other uses.

The GAA club at Collegelands, near my home, was attacked recently — it does not have a social club. It just has changing rooms, which the club uses to prepare for matches. The facilities were severely damaged in the attack, but have been repaired and are now open again. It is important that those types of halls have insurance cover against damage, even if they are only being used for cultural and sporting activities.

We want to get to a situation in which none of these halls is being damaged, and no tit-for-tat damage is

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being done. We must get the message across that there must be no more attacks on any community hall or property whatsoever. The legislation must be open enough to take attacks into account, no matter which type of hall is damaged, whether they are used as community halls, for sporting organisations or for cultural organisations such as the Orange Order or the Royal Black Preceptory. Organisations that provide a service to the community should be protected by legislation that is wide enough in its scope to ensure that all of them have the right to compensation if they are damaged.

Mr A Maginness: I thank everyone who participated in the debate and in the proceedings of the Ad Hoc Committee. It was very well attended, and there was good active discussion. It was a lively and, at times, robust debate, which was appropriate when considering the draft legislation in a forensic manner.

11.15 am

I particularly thank Mr Weir the learned Member for North Down for his expert chairing of the Committee; he did so in a helpful manner and brought a degree of professionalism to the task, which is edifying. He also brought much good humour and common sense. He might even make a good Minister for justice, although there may have been a previous bid this morning.

If any good has emerged from today's proceedings, it is the comprehensive and in-depth condemnation of attacks on community halls, and, in particular, attacks on Orange Halls; all Members sincerely condemned such attacks. That is a very important message to go out from the Assembly to the whole community. The recent attacks in Coagh and Pomeroy are in particular to be condemned, and I think that everyone in the House mentioned them.

The report presented by the Chairperson of the Committee — in a dispassionate fashion — represents as best as possible the views of all members of the Committee. There was an attempt to reach a consensus; however, that was not achieved. Nonetheless, there was an understanding of everyone's point of view. There were differences of opinion, but the main objective of the draft legislation is to permit compensation for those who are prevented from obtaining it by the law as it presently stands, and all members were united in the view that that objective should be supported. There were differences concerning what mechanisms would be used to achieve that objective; nonetheless, there was agreement on that general purpose. That is important.

Differences were also expressed about the sunset clause, but the majority of the Committee came to the view that such a clause should not be included in the legislation. Good arguments were put forward for that view: it was thought that the situation that warrants the new legislation was not likely to subside or disappear

in the near future, and, therefore, it was important that the legislation be permanent. There were alternative arguments — the view was expressed that this was a temporary situation that could be met properly by a sunset clause, which would be renewable.

Mr Kennedy expressed his strong opposition to a sunset clause. He regards it as a novel concept and believes that the sanction must remain indefinitely to protect community halls that have been subject to attack. However, a contrary view was expressed by my friend from the SDLP Declan O'Loan and also by Mr Molloy of Sinn Féin. They argued that a sunset clause should be retained because the situation is temporary.

The Committee was divided on that issue, and members could not reach a general view. However, there was unity in that a general hope was expressed that the series of attacks on halls will end permanently.

Mr Farry's view was that the draft Order is a fairly straightforward piece of legislation and that there is a market failure in the insurance system and difficulties with proving evidence of attacks. He said that the present system does not cover those attacks and that that must be remedied. He said that although the legislation is not the ideal way forward, it is the most pragmatic way forward. He generally supported the legislation, but he was not happy with the sunset clause. He felt that an equality impact assessment may not be the best way to progress, because it could be seen as an obstruction to remedying the problem rather than identifying the differing impacts on elements in the community.

It is important to remember that all Committee members were anxious to try to remedy the situation, and they all made a contribution towards doing that. Irrespective of the fact that overall agreement was not reached, goodwill was expressed and a genuine attempt was made to address the problem.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr described the attacks on the halls as a form of hate crime. He condemned the attacks as an attempt to attack the very identity of the Orange Order and to attack those who support Orange culture and those who are from the unionist community. He fully supported the legislation, apart from the sunset clause, which he felt was inappropriate and did not meet the needs of the Orange Order or the community at large.

Mr Molloy comprehensively condemned attacks on Orange Halls and, particularly, attacks on community halls. He placed great emphasis on the fact that all community halls should be given protection. He expressed his view that the draft legislation did not go far enough in order to afford that protection, which also reflects Mr O'Loan's views.

I commend the report to the House, and I commend the work of the Committee and Members'

contributions to the debate. It is an important debate, and much goodwill has been created as a result of the discussions. It is important that the House notes the good work that is contained in the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Criminal Damage (Compensation) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Assembly.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

1859 Revival Anniversary

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

Mr Simpson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of the 1859 Revival; acknowledges the positive contribution made by the Revival to society; recognises that the positive impact of the Revival is still felt today; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark this anniversary during 2009.

Members know that the dates and commemorations of events can be divisive long after the events themselves. This motion, however, relates to one date and commemoration that can be acknowledged and accepted by Members on all sides of the House. It is worded in such a way as to invite support from all sides. The motion does not mention conversions or the tangible presence of God that swept through society; it does not mention the extraordinary outward physical manifestations that occurred, often because of an overpowering sense of sinfulness; and it does not mention the crucial part that prayer played in the revival or the preaching that took place during that year of grace. However, I am sure that other Members will mention such things.

Some Members have much that they could say, such as the Ulster Unionist Member Rev Robert Coulter, who ministered in one of the churches that felt the full force of the revival. His voice will be one of authority if he speaks in the debate. For my part, I simply wish to lay out the motion as presented.

Next year will be a significant anniversary. Much valuable work has been done by groups such as the Caleb Foundation in lobbying for official recognition of the anniversary; however, more can be done.

The motion speaks of the positive contribution that the revival made to society. The revival had a massive beneficial influence on the levels of criminality. By 1860, crime was reduced. On several occasions, judges in Ulster had no cases to try. At one point, in County Antrim, no crime was reported and no prisoners were held in police custody. In Belfast, a large distillery was put up for auction, two pubs were closed because the publicans had been converted, and a third was closed because of lack of trade. In Ahoghill, drunkenness, fighting and swearing were prevalent. A policeman described it as:

“the worst wee place in the world”.

But what a transformation —

Mr Paisley Jnr: Withdraw. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Simpson: But what a transformation took place. The local presbytery examined the work and noted:

“drunkenness and ... profane language ... had been all but annihilated.”

Before the revival, it was said:

“Bellaghy was the most degraded of Irish villages ... rioting and drunkenness were the order of each evening ... such a place for lying and stealing I do not know.”

However, after the revival, it was said:

“As you pass down the street you hear, in almost every house, the voice of joy and melody.”

No account can be complete without mentioning Coleraine, in the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's constituency. He will not need reminding of the events surrounding the opening of the new town hall and of the occurrences at the school of the Irish Evangelical Society.

In my constituency of Upper Bann, the ‘Lurgan Gazette’ said that the revival:

“has at once arrested the careless and ungodly, and almost put a stop to the drinking customs of the people, spreading a seriousness over the face of society, and leading men to think of the great concerns of eternity”.

However, the events were not simply confined to what is Northern Ireland today. In Counties Monaghan, Donegal, Cavan, Limerick, Carlow and Dublin, the revival's force was felt.

11.30 am

The motion also speaks of the lasting effects of the revival, such as the promotion of sobriety.

The Countess of Londonderry stated that:

“It is impossible not to observe that one result of the much-talked-of Revival has been... the establishment of greater sobriety and temperance.”

A Justice of the Peace witnessed that, in certain parishes, the use of spirits was almost entirely abandoned. It worked a miraculous change in public manners, and was described as:

“the most striking effect produced upon national manners, in our day, in these islands”.

It also had an extraordinary influence on the mindset of the Protestant population, particularly on the involvement of lay people, the rise of mission halls and small ground-level works, and ministries.

Consider the years of violence and bloodshed that the Province has come through. Many have noted that loyalist paramilitaries never enjoyed significant popular support, and one reason for that was the abiding influence of a world view and legacy that was handed down by the revival. There were small independent churches and mission halls in the hearts of Protestant communities in which the high demands of the

scriptures in relation to sin, and our accountability to God were preached. That has had a restraining influence on families and generations ever since — and for that, we should all be grateful.

The motion calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark the anniversary. He could do so by utilising libraries for the setting up of displays; he could liaise with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to help create a revival trail for tourists and produce tourist information literature; he could work with the Ulster Museum to set up a display there, or he could explore the possibility of working in partnership with the BBC on commemorative programmes. No doubt the Minister will have his own ideas. I ask that he ensures that the anniversary does not pass unnoticed or unmarked, and that all sides of the House support the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am happy to support the motion and to hear the introduction by the proposer, who rightly says that we would all be prepared to welcome the motion and to celebrate alongside our Protestant fellow countrymen that great period in their history.

The significant increase of interest in religion is something that some of us who are interested in religion would like to see happen again. I do not know if everyone would be happy at the closing of pubs; but other, more positive aspects of it would certainly be welcomed. As for marking the anniversary of the revival, there should be displays; but the best way to mark it is for us all to reinforce interest in our spiritual lives. It is a wee bit odd that we are discussing what is a very serious, fundamentally-spiritual, issue in a House that is more used to discussing the things of Mammon. We, on this side of the House, support the motion, and we wish you well.

Mr McNarry: It was my privilege and pleasure to discuss the issue of the 1859 revival as the Assistant Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland at our Twelfth of July celebrations this year in the wonderful surroundings of Broughshane. On that glorious day — and it was a glorious day in every respect — the brethren assembled in Broughshane, as they did in every other part of our country hosting and celebrating the Twelfth of July, and were commended to give careful thought on how to advance any worthwhile opportunities that may arise and be taken by the institution to celebrate and commemorate the 1859 revival. I commend the sentiment of the Twelfth of July to the House in association with the motion tabled, which meets with the full approval of the Ulster Unionist Party, and therefore has our support.

I am sure that the Minister was grateful for the ideas that were suggested by his party colleagues on how to

mark the anniversary of the revival. I am sure that they want the Minister to confirm — if they do not, I do — what he intends to do about sponsoring or initiating an event, or events, to mark the anniversary.

I was pleased by the manner in which Mr Molloy accepted the motion. However, the Minister will be aware of the potential for howls of dissension by some people against the motion, if not in the House then outside, for reasons that are best known to themselves. In answering the call of the motion, the Minister could be dragged into the mire of precedent and find himself damned if he does and damned if does not.

I hope that there is a mature debate and a reasoned outcome on an issue that is best judged on its own merit rather than another vocal rendition of intolerance by some people for matters that others — such as me — cherish as part of their Britishness. I hope that that happens in light of the significant role that religious identity played in shaping the history of the British Isles at the time of the revival. The Minister could also consider marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin on 10 July, which is an ominous birth date of great significance and is somewhat fortuitous in its proximity to other celebrations at that time of the year.

I ask the Minister to assure the House that his Department will be able to sponsor a series of exhibitions, conferences and seminars that promote the anniversary of the revival. As the proposer of the motion eloquently stated, the revival brought 100,000 converts into the Protestant churches of Ireland. Edwin Orr noted that the revival:

“made a greater impact on Ireland than anything known since Patrick brought Christianity there.”

By the end of 1860, the effects of the Ulster revival included: strong services; unprecedented numbers of communicants; abundant prayer meetings; an increase in family prayers; unmatched scripture reading; prosperous Sunday schools; converts remaining steadfast; increased giving; the abatement of vice; and a reduction in crime. Such effects would be welcome if a revival happened in our country today.

It is estimated that one million people were converted in the United Kingdom from the beginning of the revival in Kells. Missionaries carried the movement abroad and — fortunately — the consequences of the revival are still felt today and contribute significantly to various recognisable national characteristics that we protect. Those characteristics deserve recognition and commemoration in the year of the 150th anniversary of the revival. I commend the proposer of the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: Naturally, the SDLP supports the commemoration of events that have contributed positively to communities' lives across Northern Ireland. Although it is perfectly legitimate for such commemorations or celebrations to be single identity, it is important that

they are positive, respectful and do not represent a victory for one community over the other. I have listened to Members' contributions, and I assume that a commemoration of the revival would fit those criteria.

However, the SDLP is not convinced that tabling this type of motion is helpful to the commemoration of the revival and the relevant organisations. Despite that, I acknowledge that David Simpson has outlined how he wants the Minister to commemorate the revival. If the organisers of the revival's commemoration seek recognition from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I assume that they will be subject to the same criteria and scrutiny as any other organisation.

It is important that if the Assembly gives its stamp of approval to that commemoration, it gives similar approval to other commemorations and celebrations. I assume that if the motion is passed, similar motions on Catholic events or on those of any other respected spiritual or religious group with a long or recent history that has made a positive contribution to life would also be passed by the Assembly, regardless of whether Assembly Members or the Executive share the ethos or belief system of the group.

My party has been centrally involved in the commemoration of the civil rights movement. I wonder what would have happened had my party tabled a motion to the same effect by asking the Minister to mark that particular anniversary. If the House and the Minister cannot commit to treat all social and religious groups — as described in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — in the same way, surely that discriminates against those groups.

The Assembly's approval of the motion must not be taken as *carte blanche* for departmental expenditure. Any departmental input must be proportionate to the scale of any planned events and commemorations.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the motion that has been tabled by Mr Simpson and his colleagues, and the manner in which he made his proposing speech, which stated significantly how the House can develop such matters.

At the outset, I want to declare my interest not only as a Presbyterian, but as a resident of the Presbyterian parish of Connor. That ought to give me particular insight, although, regrettably, it does not. As I am slightly younger than 150 years old, I am not particularly well informed.

Mr Simpson explained the positive aspects of the 1859 revival. However, there were some negative aspects, which may, perhaps, be acknowledged if one were to examine the matter in detail.

Mr Wells: The Member cannot leave that idea hanging. I hope that he will tell the House what he

perceives to have been the negative aspects of the 1859 revival. I must say that I have not read of any of them.

Mr Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Ford: I am not sure that that will be necessary, Mr Speaker.

The tone in which Mr Simpson introduced the motion and that of the response from, I believe, Mr Brolly, rather than Mr Molloy — although, perhaps, to some people, one member of Sinn Féin who has a grey beard is much the same as another —

Mr Storey: Both members are called Francie.

Mr Ford: Yes, I noticed that. Come on, boys; get your irony.

The tone of those Members' contributions shows clearly that, despite its difficulties, the Assembly can, occasionally, discuss potentially divisive issues in a sensible and moderate manner. For that, we should be grateful.

I acknowledge the fact that Mr Ramsey raised legitimate concerns about whether the House will demonstrate balance if similar motions are tabled on other aspects of our religious history. The proposers of the motion must consider that issue. The way in which Mr Simpson proposed the motion, at least, gives some hope that that balance can be achieved. It is, therefore, rather regrettable that what appears to have been an Ulster Unionist's prepared speech was critical of Sinn Féin, even though the party said nothing of which to be critical in the debate.

Mr McNarry: Rubbish. The Member must withdraw that remark.

Mr Ford: I will give way if the Member wishes me to.

Mr McNarry: Since the Member failed the first challenge that was put to him ably by Mr Wells, I will challenge him now to withdraw that remark or to cite evidence that I delivered a prepared speech to attack Sinn Féin.

Mr Ford: Certainly, Mr Speaker, the physical evidence of what sits in front of Mr McNarry would lend some credence to my point.

To respond to Mr Wells's challenge; the 1859 revival, undoubtedly, had positive aspects as regards commitment to religious life. However, there were times when certain aspects of it ventured into the area of mass hysteria, rather than necessarily ensuring total personal commitment. The Assembly must acknowledge that certain aspects of the revival went in that direction.

11.45 am

No doubt Mr Wells will take the opportunity to argue his case. While the 1859 revival was significant, enhanced the culture of our society and brought about

change, it must also be recognised that problems sometimes occur when movements go beyond their stated aims. The revival was, undoubtedly, a significant and positive experience for many people. Only last night, in my church car park, a discussion somehow turned to the 1859 revival. I assure Members that I did not start that conversation. A colleague who runs a business in Kells pointed out that, as a result of the revival, all five pubs in the village closed down.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: Members in the House who are from the temperance lobby will consider that to be a particularly positive move. My colleague also remarked that, such was the good behaviour of the vast majority of citizens, the Royal Irish Constabulary was on the point of making officers redundant in mid-Antrim. That could perhaps provide a lesson for today. Therefore, many positive elements should be drawn from the revival.

It is somewhat ironic that the grandfathers and fathers of those who led the revival — the Presbyterian laity of mid-Antrim — had led the political rebellion against the forces of the Crown at the end of the preceding century. Perhaps DUP Members are less enthusiastic about that. The establishment of the role of the laity, and not merely the clergy, was significant and positive. It is also slightly ironic that, only this week, Cardinal Brady announced changes in the Catholic Church that will give a greater role to the laity. It could be suggested that lessons from the revival are being learned even before the celebration of its anniversary in 2009.

The Assembly should recognise the positive aspects of the revival and work in the spirit in which Mr Simpson moved the motion. All Members should seek to learn from each other's cultural and religious history. In that spirit, the House should pass the motion and move forward to a consideration of how the anniversary can become a cause for unification rather than division.

Mr Moutray: I support the motion that was so ably moved by my colleague Mr Simpson. This important anniversary celebrates an event that has left an indelible and beneficial mark on society, not only in Ulster but much further afield. David Simpson mentioned Lurgan's experience of the revival, to which I will add further observations from the area. One eyewitness in Lurgan said:

"Congregations are large ... communicants almost doubled ... drunkenness has declined."

The rector of Magheralin Church of Ireland said:

"Morality in every sense of the word is the order of the day. The change indeed is a mighty one."

I could cite many examples from all corners of the Province, all parts of the island and across the British Isles. The motion advocates a sober acknowledgement

of a part of our history that everyone can appreciate. It is about recognising not only the revival's anniversary but also the fact that it brought good to society as a whole.

In Straid, County Antrim, the entire society was profoundly affected by the revival: the cockfighting pit that had been a place for vice of the worst kind became a preaching point, and the profanity and drunkenness that had characterised many lives were set aside.

On the wider scene, six months after the commencement of the revival, the number of prisoners sent for trial in County Antrim was half that in the previous year, and, a full year on, the figure was zero. In April 1860, there were no cases to try at the quarterly sessions in Londonderry or Carrickfergus.

The Church of Ireland Bishop of Down reported a conversation with a group of people that included three magistrates. Their unanimous testimony was that since the revival, public morals had vastly improved, and cases of drunkenness and other vices had greatly reduced. The bishop went on to ask the barrister, magistrates and grand jurymen to what cause they attributed the change. He relates that they each and all at once replied "to the revival".

Many other figures could be added to that list; some have been mentioned during the debate, and, undoubtedly, more will be mentioned before it ends.

Everyone can commemorate the anniversary, regardless of whether they agree with the religious themes that were the hallmark of those days of the revival. As has been mentioned during the debate, the historic event contributed hugely to elevating public behaviour and public morality, reducing crime and fostering basic public decency. At a time such as this, when antisocial behaviour is continuing, community bonds are breaking down and the spiral of crime against the weakest and most vulnerable members of society is ongoing, we should welcome the impact of that great event. Oh that it were like that today.

Throughout the Province, people are preparing to give proper recognition in 2009 to the 1859 revival, and much work has already been completed. The BBC has expressed interest in commemorating the revival and, to that end, has met with organisations such as the Caleb Foundation. The Minister has a keen interest in historical matters, and I urge him to seize this opportunity also. I support the motion.

Mr Storey: I support the motion and commend my colleagues for proposing it. It is often said that many of society's ills emanate from the United States of America and, ultimately, find their way into Northern Ireland. Today is an important day for the United States. Although Members might question the correlation between the United States elections and the 1859 revival, they should recall that a similar awakening occurred in the United States of America in 1858, and many people

concur that its sparks travelled across the Atlantic and lit the embers and flamed the fire in my constituency.

Given that the 1859 revival's genesis occurred in my constituency of North Antrim, I am glad that the motion asks the Minister to consider organising a commemoration. Moreover, my honourable friend from the Alliance Party Mr Ford lives close to where the revival took place. We should remember the events of 1859 with a sense of pride and honour.

Some people view religion as divisive and claim that it is the source of all the world's conflicts. It is the depravity of man's heart that causes today's conflicts. The 1859 revival demonstrated true biblical Christianity at its best and, as a result, people's lives changed. Today, we seek a society that is free of violence and the ills that are mentioned in the Chamber. Members urge Ministers to implement proposals in order to create a well-ordered and well-structured society — bearing the trademarks of what we deem a good society — in which the elderly can live without the fear of crime and young people can expect a bright future. It is impossible to achieve those outcomes without seriously considering the impact of the 1859 revival, during which the gospel was preached. That gospel is not for unionism at the expense of nationalism, or vice versa — it is for everyone. I am glad that, during the debate, Members have welcomed the idea of a commemoration.

I am disappointed — not for the first time — in the attitude displayed by the SDLP. It has exhibited double standards many times, whether it is with respect to the Budget or other matters.

Mr O'Loan: In view of what Mr Storey has said, it is important to state that the Assembly has no function in advocating the cause of any particular religious belief or denomination. The debate is about whether it is appropriate for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to apply some of its resources to marking the anniversary of the 1859 revival. It is not for that Department to take any view on whether the 1859 revival was a good thing or a bad thing, or whether it was of benefit to society in religious terms: that is not the function of the Assembly or the Executive.

However, the revival was a significant historical event; and to mark such an event, it may well be appropriate for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to have a role — but only in that respect.

Mr Storey: The one benefit of that contribution is that I get an extra minute to speak. There was no other substance to it.

It is the responsibility of the Minister and the Department —

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member will probably agree that the logical conclusion that one would draw from

the comments we have just heard from our North Antrim colleague is that any commemoration of St Patrick's Day should be cancelled. I find it astounding that he has just made those comments. The man is atrocious.

Mr Storey: I thank the honourable Member for his intervention.

Mr McNarry: Are you looking for another minute?

Mr Storey: I wonder whether I will be given another minute for that. I will try to squeeze out the time as much as possible.

It is the responsibility of the Assembly and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to commemorate events that have made a significant contribution to the well-being and good of society. That is why the SDLP's comments are reprehensible.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate and I congratulate those who tabled the motion. I am pleased to see it before the Assembly.

I welcome students from Newtownhamilton High School who are in the Public Gallery. They are enjoying the debate and are, I hope, being educated by it.

Anniversaries are important; and 31 October is particularly important as it is the anniversary of Martin Luther's protest which brought forward the Reformation. Some people celebrate the pagan festival of Halloween on that date; however, we should be mindful that Luther did what he did on 31 October, and we should give thanks for that.

According to the 'Encyclopaedia of Christianity':

"the term 'revivals' is a general one, used to describe the movements of awakening that covered all the Protestant territories of Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries... Revivals are seen as counteracting Christian decline, both spiritual and social... by special evangelistic and organizational means".

We do well also to remember that revival does not begin in a place, it begins in the heart.

During the revival the whole of Ulster was caught up in the "movement of God", which began in the parish of Connor in County Antrim. Although it began among Presbyterians, and I am proud to be one, the revival was not limited to them. Many ministers of the established Church and smaller denominations played a significant role. In November 1856, a Mrs Colville, an English lady from Gateshead, arrived in Ballymena on a door-to-door mission to share her faith. Through talking with Mrs Colville, a man named James McQuilken was converted. People saw a change in McQuilken and, over time, that resulted in Jeremiah Meneely, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace being drawn to Christ.

12.00 noon

That was the beginning of the revival. Encouraged by Rev J H Moore, who was the minister of Connor Presbyterian Church, the four young converts began to meet weekly for prayer and Bible study. Those meetings continued from September through the winter of 1857 and into 1858. On New Year's Day 1858, the first conversion that could be related directly to that prayer meeting took place. There were conversions every night after that.

The prayer meetings soon grew dramatically, with many new ones being established. By the spring of 1859, there was an average of 16 prayer meetings every night in the Connor parish alone. Before long, the revival spread to Kellswater, Ahoghill, Portglenone and other places. Soon, almost the whole of Ulster was caught up in the revival, and as the clerk of session of Bessbrook Presbyterian Church, I am pleased and proud to say that the revival was experienced in the Newry presbytery at that time. So many people were caught up in the revival that there was not enough room in the churches. Meetings had to take place in fields and on roads, and they sometimes involved several thousand people.

The impact of the revival was tremendous. One of the results was that churches were overcrowded on Sundays, which is in stark contrast to church attendance in the modern age. Dead, formal ritualism was replaced by direct preaching and praise. The Connor Presbyterian meeting house became too small to meet the needs of the congregation.

Those changes were very positive. One writer claimed that the 1859 revival had six specific characteristics. It had its origin in profound conviction of sin, manifested in vast numbers of people asking for forgiveness of sin. It made for temperance, as we already heard. It worked a miraculous change in manners. It resulted in praise — the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church appointed a day for prayer and thanksgiving to God. Millions of hymn books were sold. The work was mainly brought about through humble and local means.

Mr Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Kennedy: It also made for unity. We should take the opportunity to celebrate that anniversary, which should be remembered for very positive reasons.

Mr G Robinson: At the outset, I declare an interest as a Presbyterian.

The 1859 revival was an event that was not just a religious one — it was an event that changed undoubtedly the very fabric of Ulster society. When 100,000 people are affected by changes in society, those changes must be reflected throughout the entire population. The

changes that society underwent during the 1859 revival are still recognisable in the underlying standards in which our society believes today. An event of that significance is surely worthy of celebration and recognition.

In preparing for my contribution to today's debate, I studied events that occurred in my constituency. There are reports from Limavady of great gatherings, and one account states:

"A gentleman from the Presbyterian congregation of Cullybackey addressed the assembled throng...Multitudes remained till the morning light, alternately engaged in singing and prayer."

That describes a fundamental change in society. In Garvagh, the rector, the Rev Mr Smyth, wrote:

"I have been twenty-seven years rector of this parish, and never before witnessed even the most remote approach to what is now going on. Vice and immorality of every sort lessened to an incredible extent, and oaths scarcely ever heard, or drunkenness seen."

The most extraordinary account of all came from Coleraine. In the Irish Society School in June 1859, a teacher noticed:

"boy after boy slipping out of the classroom. After a while, the master stood upon something, which enabled him to look over the wall of the playground. There he saw a number of his boys ranged round the wall on their knees in earnest prayer, every one apart. The scene overcame him. A strange disorder for schoolmaster and mistress to have to control! The united cry reached the adjoining streets, and soon every spot on the premises was filled."

That event, and another meeting in Coleraine town hall that was attended by a great number of people, can only be described as a peaceful revolution for individuals and for the entire country. It must also be remembered that the revival was not limited by class or creed. From master to servant, the wealthy to the poor, the standards that individuals and society set for themselves were forever changed by the revival of 1859.

All too often, the Assembly recognises tragic or sad occurrences, so it is only right for us to celebrate the positivity of the 1859 revival. Agreeing the motion would be a public acknowledgement of our intention to do that. The motion is deserving of support from all Members of the Assembly, as we have all been affected by the revival. I am delighted to support the motion, and I hope that all Members will do so, in recognition of the historical importance and lasting influences of the events of the 1859 revival.

Mr Paisley Jnr: In the course of the debate, I am reminded of the notorious words that were spoken by the adviser of a former Prime Minister: "We don't do God". As a consequence of modern, western society's attitude towards religion, it was too embarrassing, too touchy a subject, for that Prime Minister to discuss God politically or to be questioned about whether he had ever prayed with the President. However, when that Prime Minister left office, he expressed an interest in setting up a foundation promoting God and religion.

When we, as members of western society, look to the Middle East, we see that, every six hours, society there stops for five minutes to pray. Although we may not worship the same God, there is no doubt that the devotion of the people in the East puts many people in our western Christian society to shame. We, as a Christian society, should learn from that to cherish such things as prayer and how we promote our belief in God. That is why I am more than happy to support a motion that causes us to stop, think and affirm that we, as a society, "do God" and are prepared to recognise the importance of prayer, not only in an individual's life, but in its effect on society.

There is no doubt that the 1859 revival had a profound effect on Ulster and its people. Today, many villages have two churches of the same denomination. The Member for Strangford mentioned that he gave a talk in Broughshane. The fact that there are two Presbyterian churches in Broughshane is a direct result of the 1859 revival — so many people wanted to attend the church there that an even bigger one had to be built in order to contain them.

Many towns and villages — such as Coleraine or Ahoghill — share that history and have more than one Presbyterian church because of the revival's impact. That gives an insight into the architectural history of those villages, which is something that we should encourage the Department of the Environment (DOE) to promote. For example, the first Ahoghill Presbyterian church is architecturally different to the second church because of the urgency to have a mission hall built in order to promote the revival and accommodate its effects.

Similarly, the village pillars at the Presbyterian church in Broughshane were removed because of people thronging to get to church. Such stories should be recounted, because they are part and parcel of the identity and the history of our people. Had the revival happened 10 or 15 years earlier, before the Irish potato famine, I have no doubt that it would have had a profound effect on emigration across the Atlantic and that Northern Ireland's impact on America would have been even greater.

In his contribution, David Simpson was absolutely right when he said that the reason that Ulster did not plunge into civil war in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was because of what happened 100 years earlier. That is an important point.

I ask the Minister what we should do to mark the 1859 revival. What can we do to draw attention to it? There should be some discussions with the Minister about that. Other organisations exemplify how they mark certain events. For example, every year the Royal Mail produces commemorative stamps, covering subjects that include St Patrick and great architectural features in Northern Ireland such as Carrickfergus

Castle and the Queen's Bridge. Therefore, we should encourage the Royal Mail to commemorate the 1859 revival. Recently, the fiftieth anniversary of Her Majesty's ascension to the throne was marked by the production of commemorative stamps. Perhaps a stamp could be produced to promote the 1859 revival.

Telling the story of the revival should be encouraged. Danny Kennedy's recounting of the story of Mrs Caldwell in Ballymena and the impact that that had on young men's lives was fascinating. That story is earthy and rich in history — let it be told. We must provide opportunities and local platforms from which to tell such stories.

Finally, I hope that, late next year, the Minister will hold an event in Stormont that will promote the anniversary, so that we might look to a time when there might be another revival in our country.

Mr I McCrea: This is an important debate, because it brings the remarkable workings of God in 1859 — when he came in power and blessing to his church — to the attention of Members and, indeed, people in this Province. It is estimated that, in one year, 100,000 souls were converted to Christ. That means that 100,000 lives were transformed by the power of the gospel.

I thank my colleagues for proposing the motion. The 1859 Ulster revival affected not only saints and sinners, but society. The revival's presence and power transformed homes and communities throughout Ulster for God and for good. In his foreword to the reprint of Rev John Weir's book, 'Heaven Came Down', Rev Tom Shaw referred to the change that the revival brought to society:

"People returned to the house of God in great numbers for preaching, worship and prayer. Sabbath desecration declined, and the observation of that day was more widespread. At certain periods and places, every day was like a Sabbath as people rallied for prayer."

As other Members said, on many occasions, people simply stopped to pray.

Drunkenness was diminished greatly and, in some cases, it was totally abandoned. The power of the gospel sorely affected the drink trade, so much so that public houses were either shut up or completely deserted. How things have changed. It is recorded that on a single market day in an Ulster town, not one glass of whiskey was sold.

In addition, the use of profane language decreased noticeably. In general, evil habits and customs of every kind suffered a severe blow as a result of the effects of the heaven-sent revival.

Given that the motion refers to the revival's impact on society, I shall quote further about how it resulted in a moral transformation. The then Countess of Londonderry remarked:

"One result of the much talked-about revival has been the closing of public houses and the establishment of greater sobriety and temperance."

The moral good that resulted from the 1859 revival affected every aspect of society, and, consequently, sectarian violence became a thing of the past. Speaking a few days after 12 July 1859, a Roman Catholic magistrate attributed the peaceful manner in which the Orange celebrations took place to the religious movement in northern Ireland. He said:

"the revival now proceeding has extinguished party animosities, and produced the most wholesome moral results."

The Ulster revival resulted in great reductions in crime. The number of prisoners presented for trial at the County Antrim quarter sessions in October 1859 — six months after the revival commenced — was half that of the previous year.

I am glad to say that the revival also came to my constituency — although I was not there, and I cannot think of anyone who might have been there to see it. When the revival came to Cookstown, where market day was previously known for drunkenness, drunken behaviour became a thing of the past.

A pub owner from Tullyhogue was converted at that time. He became a preacher, and Donaghey Congregational Church was formed out of his ministry. Furthermore, a local Presbyterian church in Sandholes had to increase its size in order to cope with the number of people attending its services.

12.15 pm

The motion refers to the lasting contribution of the revival, and its effect can be seen by virtue of the fact that, to this day, Northern Ireland is a country in which the gospel of God's saving grace is preached in many halls and churches.

I, therefore, support the motion and, with other Members, look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on the proposals.

Dr W McCrea: I did not intend to speak on the motion, because I was thrilled and delighted that my colleagues, who are not in the ministry, wanted to inform the Assembly of the great blessing that the revival brought to the Province, not only in 1859, but thereafter.

I was working in my office — I must confess — and I heard Pat Ramsey speak. I was disappointed that he tried to turn the motion into a sectarian issue. In respect of the revival, a visitation of God is one for mankind. It does not matter whether the individual whom God visits is a Protestant or a Roman Catholic or whether he or she is looked upon in the world as wise or ignorant. The Saviour gave the commission to go into the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

Sitting beside Mr Ramsey in the Chamber today is a Member from East Londonderry, and I am sure that he would like to speak in the debate, because there was no place more touched by the revival than the town of Coleraine. People in Coleraine, including everyone from the youngest child, were greatly moved. In fact, a little boy at school was so disturbed that he was sent home, because the staff could not settle him. On his way home, the little boy went into a vacant house and called on God to have mercy on his soul. He returned to school to say that the issue that had troubled him was settled. God started to move in that school, including the upper part in which the girls were educated.

People heard about what God was doing among the children in that school in Coleraine, and they visited its precincts. On doing so, the elderly people and the parents, too, were affected by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This country needs a visitation of God.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: I am not getting into a debate. I am speaking from the heart; I am not speaking for a political debate. Irrespective of what part of the community we come from, we all have to meet God. It would be good, therefore, if we all had a visitation of God upon our hearts; that is something that we all need.

I trust and pray that those Members who appear to be excited about the contents of the motion and who are trying to turn it into something that it was never intended to be remember the social impact that the 1859 revival had on society. Not only did it influence sobriety and change the lives of individuals, it changed homes. Lives were changed for good, which is something for which we should all long.

The society in which we live is broken; it has many broken hearts and broken homes. I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ can heal the broken-hearted, and in healing the broken sin-sick soul, he can heal our homes, families, towns, villages and communities.

That is why history books have been written, and I am sorry that my friend Rev Dr Coulter is not in his place — I can say “my friend” because we are blood relatives — as no one knows more of that history than he does.

The courtrooms of our society were changed because lives were changed. It is almost 150 years since that revival, and it would do this land good to call on God to send us another revival. That is the longing of my heart, and I pray that God will send it right now.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): I welcome the debate and congratulate the honourable Member for Upper Bann Mr Simpson for securing it. He has a deep and abiding interest in historical and cultural matters, especially re-

enactments, which he has had some knowledge of recently. It is appropriate to consider the revival in the wider context of where our society is today.

I will try to incorporate Members' comments into my response. The motion raises three issues: an acknowledgement that the revival made a positive contribution to society; recognition that it had a positive impact, not just then but now; and a request that my Department mark the anniversary during 2009.

The contribution to society was prevalent in a series of comments. Mr Simpson outlined the relevance that the revival had then and continues to have 150 years later, and that was repeated throughout the debate. Mr Brolly referred to it, Mr Ramsey's comments invoked some comment that I will come to later, and Mr Ford also referred to the fact that it was a significant event. A series of supportive comments were made about the contribution that the revival made to society.

Several Members referred to the religious context of the term “revival”. It is a specific period of spiritual renewal in the life of the community. I have no doubt that the social and cultural changes to society that emanated from the spiritual revival were transformational on the wider community. Several Members referred to the fact that churches are testimony to the events that happened 150 years ago and there is no doubt that that transformational effect is still with us, to some degree, 150 years later.

Mr Moutray, with reference to Lurgan and Antrim, Mr Storey from North Antrim and Mr Kennedy from Newry and Armagh referred to the fact that churches noted dramatic increases in attendances at that time, with some churches running services continuously from nine in the morning until 10 at night. Some people may say sarcastically that some churches today just feel like that, but I will not go down that route. Churches in Belfast reported a sevenfold increase in attendances. I have obtained from the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland a photocopy of the record book of Straid Congregational Church, County Antrim, which contains a handwritten report of the actual events of 1859.

A brief extract is all that is necessary to show the impact that the revival had at the time. The following was handwritten by the secretary of the church at the centre of those events:

“I might record many wonderful sessions of this divine work, but every day was a day of wonders — for meetings were held daily and continued all night. At one held on the Lovers Hill upwards of two thousand people assembled — and stood under a pelting rain for two hours listening to the preaching of the Gospel. Many were stricken and waited until dark, seeking pardon in the Saviour.”

Many Members, including Ian McCrea, Ian Paisley Jnr and Dr McCrea, mentioned the open-air meetings that were held. Botanic Gardens in Belfast was the site of a gathering of almost 40,000 people — and,

remember, that was a religious service. Several Members, including Dr McCrea, mentioned gatherings of some 15,000 to 20,000 in Coleraine. That is testimony to the scale of the revival, which has had such a lasting impact.

Other Members mentioned the decrease in the number of public houses at the time. For example, there were 16 public houses in the village of Crumlin, and the owners of 10 of them voluntarily declined to seek a renewal of their licences. Ian McCrea quoted a judge at Downpatrick assizes, a Roman Catholic, who said:

“the revival now proceeding has extinguished party animosities, and produced the most wholesome moral results.”

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Minister has told some fascinating stories. He has probably also read about the events at Harland and Wolff shipyard. Following their conversion, several labourers began to return items that had been stolen from the shipyard. So many items were returned that a new shed had to be built to house them. Again, that fascinating story shows the profound impact that the revival had on our society.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for that point. The more I read and hear about the events of 1859, the more I believe that those involved in the production of films about the more unsavoury aspects of our society would do well to turn their attention to the accurate portrayal of events in our country 150 years ago. In that way, they could provide fascinating accounts of what occurred at the time and give people insight into the underlying Christian ethos of our society.

The motion touches on another issue: the philosophical and social changes that the revival instigated, and their continuing impact on our society. The transformation that the revival wrought on our society is still evident in our community and its strong spiritual backbone. That backbone gave many the strength to cope throughout the dark days of our recent Troubles.

A third issue is whether my Department plans to mark the anniversary of the 1859 revival in 2009. My Department does not provide support to, or for, religious commemorations. However, I can report that a significant exhibition will be held that will include the 1859 revival at a local level. The Mid-Antrim Museum and Arts Centre at the Braid is planning an exhibition for late 2009, entitled ‘Divine Inspiration: Remarkable Objects Reflecting Faith’.

In addition, I am sure that the honourable Members who tabled the motion will be pleased to know that as a result of their motion, the Department has received information about other religious groups that are holding events to mark the anniversary of the revival. Therefore, it is clear that the motion is generating activity that will mark that very significant and notable landmark in our society’s history.

12.30 pm

Mr O’Loan: I am surprised by the Minister’s remark that his Department does not do religious commemorations — I will come to that in a moment. Earlier, Ian Paisley Jnr referred to the politician’s remark: “We don’t do God”. Elected Members in any legislature are entitled to have religious views and they are entitled to bring those religious views to bear when they are examining social issues.

However, many Members have been confused in what they have said in the debate. Quite rightly, they have provided evidence of the significance of the 1859 revival — that is relevant, because it is the test of whether the revival was a major social event at the time and deserves to be commemorated as such. Some years ago, I was involved in Ballymena Borough Council’s revival commemorations in which a plaque was put up, marking the initial location of the revival. I attended a related function in the local Orange Hall. It is perfectly proper for DCAL to recognise the revival. However, Members have confused the debate by advocating that DCAL make a contribution in support of the religious beliefs expressed in the revival. It is not the function of DCAL or the Executive to do that.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the honourable Member for that not-so-brief intervention. He will note that I outlined the Department’s approach to matters that have a religious connotation. He also mentioned matters of historical note, which I will turn to shortly. I note his comment that he attended a revival event in an Orange Hall. I am sure that the Hansard report will be examined, because his attendance at such an event seems to contradict his previous comments disputing that cross-community activities take place in Orange Halls. However, I am not going to go down that route, and I will resist the temptation to engage in further banter with the honourable Member.

The Mid-Antrim Museum’s exhibition will examine how significant objects reflect faith, both locally and globally. More generally, the exhibition will explore the challenge of museums’ interpretation of religion. Mid-Antrim is regarded as the spark for the spread of the revival in Ulster and beyond, and I am informed that the museum’s collection includes a number of objects that relate directly to the revival, notably the pulpit associated with Ballymacvea Gospel Hall and Jeremiah Meneely. He was one of the young men who were closely associated with the revival’s origins in Kells and was also referred to by Danny Kennedy.

The Mid-Antrim Museum’s exhibition will include material on the revival and other objects that reflect local religious traditions. The exhibition will be augmented by items that have been loaned from the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, which holds a

remarkable collection of rare religious books and manuscripts from across the world. A key aim of the exhibition is to promote greater awareness of cultural diversity and religious issues in contemporary society. In that context, it aims to support good relations in mid-Antrim and the wider community.

It is up to local museums and libraries to decide what historical exhibitions they stage. However, I urge those institutions not to miss a great opportunity to inform the public by promoting an important aspect of our culture and heritage. I also suggest that anyone who wishes to commemorate the revival should contact their local museums and libraries to establish what information is available and what can be done.

I warmly welcome the debate, the participation of Members and the exhibition that will be held next year. It is a fine example of a local museum carrying out its mandate of developing a local issue and staging an exhibition that can draw people from outside the area into the debate. I hope that other local museums and libraries in Northern Ireland become involved.

The legacy of the 1859 revival is that the Christian values that were promulgated remain relevant today. They are reflected in the way in which people treat one another and in the new immigrants who have chosen to live in our community. It is in everyone's interest not to lose sight of such a monumental and historic event. When they are attributed to a religious revival, society as a whole must warmly welcome reductions in crime and in disputes in the home or in society.

Mr Wells: I find it astonishing that the only Member who is an authority on the 1859 revival, Rev Bob Coulter, has not spoken. Previously, he has not only spoken but written on the revival. It is inexplicable that, having been in the Chamber, he was not able to speak. I am sure that the Ulster Unionist Party could have found a slot for a man of his ability to have spoken during the debate.

Mr McNarry: I wish to correct that point. Rev Coulter is not in the Chamber, and the Speaker will confirm that I have apologised for his absence. Rev Coulter was unable to speak in the slot that the Ulster Unionist Party requested. That is unfortunate, but it was Rev Coulter's decision.

Mr Speaker: I confirm that Rev Dr Robert Coulter was due to have spoken but withdrew his name because he had to leave.

Mr Wells: Had he been able to stay, I would have taken an intervention from Rev Coulter.

The debate's recurring theme has been the profound influence on Ulster society of the 1859 revival. Its influences can be seen to this day in the form of churches, in the fact that Northern Ireland has a much higher number of evangelical Christians than many

other parts of the world, and in the fact that Northern Ireland society holds higher moral values on many issues than the rest of the United Kingdom. An obvious case is the 1967 Abortion Act, which was not extended to Northern Ireland because of that difference in moral principles, many of which stem from the 1859 revival.

I congratulate Mr Simpson on his excellent introduction to the debate. He praised the work of the Caleb Foundation and, in common with other Members, he described the influence of the 1859 revival on his constituency and beyond. Members heard examples from Limavady, Coleraine, Londonderry, mid-Ulster, north Armagh, east Antrim and County Down. Members have described the enormous impact of a movement that changed the lives of 100,000 people and, in many aspects, Northern Ireland's history; as well as extending its influence much further, into North America and the rest of the UK. Mr Simpson also spoke about the resultant huge drop in crime and the decline in drunkenness. Today's Northern Ireland needs another revival that will create a similar trend, because society is breaking down radically because of the unwinding of the influence of the 1859 revival.

In a very brief contribution, Mr Brolly welcomed the motion and said that the best way forward was to reinforce interest in spiritual lives. Surprisingly, I find myself in agreement with him.

Mr McNarry made the useful point that it is 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his theses on the door of Wittenberg Church. That is also important to remember — there is a coming together of two important historical events that affected the lives of almost everyone in Northern Ireland. Mr McNarry made a valid and important point when he said that the 1859 revival was the most important spiritual awakening in Ulster since the days of St Patrick.

I was surprised at the comments of Mr Pat Ramsey the honourable Member for Foyle because he is one of the good guys — one of the few good guys in the SDLP. *[Laughter.]* I have worked well with Pat on many important issues — yet he tried to pour cold water on the debate and dampen support for the commemoration. I, unquestionably, expect that from his colleague Mr Dallat. *[Laughter.]*

Unlike others, I am prepared to let Mr Dallat intervene if he wishes to defend himself. However, to compare the 1859 revival with the civil rights movement is totally unfair. The Member must admit that the civil rights movement was not religious and that it had totally different connotations for the people of Northern Ireland. I am sure that Pat Ramsey will reflect and repent on what he said today.

If I was surprised by Mr Ramsey's comments, I was shocked by those of Mr Ford. He said that there were

some negative aspects of the 1859 revival, and the only phrase that he could come up with was mass hysteria. The revival was not about mass hysteria — it was about thousands of people whose lives were blighted by sin, drunkenness, profanity and immorality, turning to the Christian way and living sober, upright lives. What is the downside of that? That is what is needed in today's society. I am surprised that Mr Ford did not stay in the Chamber to hear my criticism, as I forewarned him of it.

The Member for Upper Bann Mr Moutray highlighted the profound influence of the revival on Upper Bann, Lurgan and Portadown. It was extraordinary that antisocial behaviour declined dramatically, and there were no court cases relating to such behaviour in Londonderry and Carrickfergus.

Mr Storey was more parochial and stated the importance of the revival in his constituency of North Antrim. In fact, the 1859 revival was based on the fervent prayers of a small group of people meeting in Kells and Connor, which are in the honourable Member's constituency. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those people. They changed lives forever.

Mr Kennedy mentioned Martin Luther King and gave us an interesting and useful definition of revival. He spoke about the revival's profound impact on south Armagh, Newtownhamilton and Bessbrook. He made the valid point that revival does not start in society or in institutions; it starts in the hearts of individuals who recognise their sinful condition. His was a positive, useful contribution. He also mentioned the fact that churches in his area were so crammed that new churches had to be built. That indicates the sheer scale of the revival.

George Robinson — never one to miss a chance to be parochial — mentioned Limavady and Garvagh, but I must point out that the revival went beyond his constituency. However, it certainly made a profound impact on East Londonderry.

Ian Paisley Jnr was rightly critical of Members who tried to pour scorn on the motion. He mentioned the importance of Broughshane and the effect of the revival on that small community. To this day, there are many godly people in that village, and that can be traced back to 1859.

There are people alive in Northern Ireland today who knew people who were involved in the 1859 revival. The revival did not happen that long ago — elderly people in our Province can still recall meeting people who were caught up in it.

It has been a very measured and useful debate. I understand that the Department cannot fund events, and I respect that. However, if organisations come up with interesting ideas for events, they should be able to apply for funding from DCAL.

I would like to add to Ian Paisley Jnr's point and make a couple of suggestions of my own. The idea of producing a stamp to commemorate the 1859 revival is excellent, and it should be put to Royal Mail immediately, because the lead time on such issues is quite lengthy.

A special service of thanksgiving could also be considered in some suitable locality, such as Broughshane, Straid, Kells or Connor, on the appropriate date to commemorate this important event. A Member to my left has just suggested that Coleraine town hall would be an appropriate venue for holding such an event. Queen's University or the University of Ulster could host an academic conference on the effect of the 1859 revival on society. The experts could then convince the Mr Ramseys and Mr Fords of this world that the 1859 revival was a good thing. It was good for society, and we can trace its influence over the past 150 years.

12.45 pm

Perhaps commemorative plaques could be affixed to properties associated with the revival. I understand that the house in which the first series of prayer meetings was held has, unfortunately, been demolished, but the original church is still there. Perhaps the Minister should erect plaques to commemorate the first meetings. A book to commemorate the revival and to update our understanding and knowledge of the important event could also be considered.

I wish to thank the honourable Members for their contributions. Unfortunately, I do not have time to comment on the views expressed by Rev William McCrea and his son Ian. This debate has been useful. Let us hope that it will stimulate our society to commemorate, rightly, this important event, and maybe Mr Ramsey and Mr Ford will cut the ribbon of the opening exhibition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of the 1859 Revival; acknowledges the positive contribution made by the Revival to society; recognises that the positive impact of the Revival is still felt today; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to mark this anniversary during 2009.

Mr 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 12.46 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Levy on Plastic Carrier Bags

Mr Deputy 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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McKay: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports, in principle, a levy on plastic carrier bags and notes the French Government's decision to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags by 2010; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward legislation, as a matter of priority, to introduce a levy on plastic carrier bags and to develop a plan to phase out their use.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a motion of great importance, because we must do all that we can to give the public the opportunity to change its behaviour with regard to the environment. In particular, we must draw attention to the waste and the eyesore on the landscape that plastic carrier bags have become.

Each adult goes through hundreds of plastic carrier bags every year. They are an eyesore on our streets, our waterways and our beaches. On average, we use each plastic bag for only 12 to 20 minutes before they are disposed of. In the marine environment, plastic-bag litter is lethal, and kills many birds, seals and other wildlife every year. I am sure that many Members have seen photographs of the damage that such litter causes to animals, including seals and other forms of wildlife that are common to the coasts of County Antrim and County Down. Many members of the public feel that action must be taken in order to ensure that such incidents come to an end.

Plastic carrier bags and excess packaging are not bad for just the environment; they are bad for our pockets. Studies that were carried out just last year established that excess packaging, as well as plastic carrier bags, cost the average family about £470 a year, which is a stark statistic. All levels of Government must take action in order to ensure that there is a reduction in the amount of packaging and plastic that is used.

We began to use plastic bags for consumer goods in only the 1950s; it is clear that there was no need for them before then. Many people believe that we can work towards a situation in which we will not be reliant on

plastic bags. Consumers recognise that non-biodegradable plastic bags are not a necessity, which is why the public are in favour of a plastic-bag levy and are willing to change their behaviour in order to ensure that we live in a clean and waste-free environment.

There are examples of Governments taking action in order to reduce plastic-bag waste. The Government in Bangladesh have identified plastic-bag litter as one the main causes of flooding and blocked drainage, and they have imposed an outright ban on the use of plastic bags.

There were 10.5 billion plastic bags in use in France in 2002. As a result of the positive and proactive approach that was taken by the French Government, that figure had been reduced to 2.1 billion in 2007, representing an 80% reduction in the use of plastic bags in France. The French are still being proactive in that regard and are examining other ways to reduce excess plastic packaging. The authorities in China, on Corsica and in San Francisco have taken the more radical measure of outlawing plastic bags in large supermarkets. Plastic-bag levies are already in place in Italy, Belgium and Switzerland, and most supermarkets in Germany and the Netherlands have introduced similar levies.

Of course, the introduction of a levy on plastic bags in the South has been a great success story. In the Twenty-six Counties, the levy had an immediate effect, with use, per capita, decreasing overnight from an estimated 328 bags to 21 bags. Reduction in the consumption of plastic bags has been considerable — estimated at more than 90%. There has also been a decrease in excess of 95% in plastic-bag litter. In the South, the aim has been to encourage consumers to move to re-useable bags and boxes, and they have, by and large, changed to those alternatives rather than use plastic bags only once.

Members are well aware of the examples of some of the larger stores and supermarkets that have already introduced levies in the North. IKEA has introduced levies, as has Marks and Spencer, which has shown a very good example by introducing a five pence charge for plastic bags in the North. That has resulted in a 70% reduction in the use of plastic bags, and the final outcome of that initiative has been the raising of £80,000 for a local charity, which must be commended.

The levy is primarily about influencing consumer behaviour; reducing the use of plastic carrier bags, and encouraging people to re-use bags rather than simply using them on one occasion and disposing of them, leading to the immense environmental damage of which we are all aware.

Evidence shows that the introduction of the levy in the South has resulted in a fall of over 95% in plastic-bag litter. Those who do not recognise what has occurred in the South as a success story are kidding themselves.

I have seen some of the counter claims, pointing to an increase in the sale of bin bags. That is a bizarre example to point to; I have never seen anyone go into a shop to purchase goods carrying a bin bag.

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate the Member's point — that people do not go into supermarkets with black bin liners. However, the issue with respect to bin liners is the re-use of plastic bags at home. Rather than re-using plastic bags, which they do not have, people are using bin liners to dispose of rubbish from their homes, and that is the cause of the increase in the purchase of bin liners from supermarkets, which runs contrary to the objective of reducing plastic bags in general.

Mr McKay: One must point to the statistics, and those from the South show clearly that plastic-bag litter, and litter in general, has reduced dramatically — by 95%. One cannot argue with those figures.

Governments across Europe — in France, Germany, Italy, and even across the water — are getting to grips with the issue. They are considering ways to reduce the use of plastic bags and to change consumer culture. Therefore, the onus is on the Minister of the Environment here to use his initiative and to be proactive on the issue, because it is one that the public, by and large, support. Measures need to be taken to phase out the use of plastic bags, and the Minister of the Environment needs to do something constructive rather than stand up in the Assembly and make jokes.

Members need to see action being taken on environmental issues; something which has not happened so far. To date, the Minister has not been an effective Environment Minister — in fact, he has been more of an “embarrassment Minister” as far as my party is concerned, and, indeed, as Members on the opposite side of the House also admit in private.

The onus is on the Environment Minister to take action on the issue, because it is one that has cross-party support and the support of the wider public. I urge him to take action and not to sit on his hands, as he usually does.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank both colleagues, and members of the Committee, Mr Boylan and Mr McKay, for bringing the motion before the Assembly for debate.

The issue of a levy on plastic carrier bags was first raised by the Committee for the Environment in March, when it asked the Department to provide an update on any plans by the Minister to consider the introduction of a levy, or tax, on plastic bags.

In her response, the then Minister, Minister Foster, said that her officials had been considering several options to reduce the local environmental problems

that are caused by discarded plastic bags. She conceded that a levy was one option, but she said that she wanted to consider all the issues before consulting in due course. At that time, she had no plans to introduce either a levy or legislation.

At the same time, however, the Chancellor announced in his Budget speech that legislation would be introduced to impose a charge on single-use carrier bags if sufficient progress were not made on a voluntary basis by the end of the year. As a result, key major retailers introduced a voluntary target of a reduction of 25% in the use of such bags by the end of 2008. If achieved, that would lead in practice to a reduction to 12.4 billion of the number of bags that are used across the UK.

However, in June 2008, the Department of the Environment acknowledged that, without further incentives, the voluntary approach would not deliver the reductions that it wanted. The Department told the Committee that Northern Ireland had agreed to participate in an amendment to the UK Climate Change Bill in order to provide enabling powers to require retailers to impose a charge on single-use carrier bags but that it would use those powers only if it became necessary.

That approach must be compared with that which has been taken down South; indeed, Mr McKay referred to that. In 2002, the introduction of the plastic-bag levy had an immediate effect on consumer behaviour. Usage of plastic bags decreased instantly from an estimated 328 bags a person to 21 bags a person. That was a reduction of more than 90% of the 1.2 billion bags that were estimated to have been given out each year at retail outlets. The knock-on decrease in litter created by plastic bags resulted in a similarly dramatic reduction of over 95%. Before the introduction of the levy, plastic bags accounted for 5% of litter; at 0.22%, they now account for barely any litter.

A recent pilot by a major retailer demonstrated similar success in changing consumer behaviour in the North. In the past 12 months, Marks and Spencer successfully trialled charging for food carrier bags in over 50 of its stores throughout the North and in the south-west of England. The trials resulted in customers' use of food carrier bags being reduced by over 70%, and, in the process, it raised over £80,000 for Groundwork. That money is now being used for that organisation's work in partnership with local communities to link economic and social regeneration through the environment.

The issue is, of course, not only a recent concern. In 2002, during the previous Assembly mandate, the Committee for the Environment sought legal advice on the possibility of Northern Ireland's introducing its own levy in the absence of a similar approach in GB. The Committee concluded at that time that the levy was within the competence of the Assembly.

As a constituency MLA, I look forward to the Minister introducing proposals to the Committee that will help our countryside to be improved and to look clean, green and welcoming. I, therefore, look forward to the Minister bringing detailed proposals in that regard to the Committee. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: I welcome the opportunity to debate this important topic. Despite some of the cheap jibes that were made by the Member who moved the motion, I thank him for proposing it.

The DUP recognises that there is a serious issue to be tackled. We have some reservations about the wording of the motion, and I will come to that later. However, that does not negate the need to take action on the subject. As has been said, plastic bags present a growing and serious problem, particularly because of the impact that they have on the environment of beaches and the effect that they have on beach wildlife, for example. Although the introduction of biodegradable bags may be beneficial to the environment in the long term, it would create short-term problems with litter.

Members have identified the impact that plastic bags have, but it would be wrong not to mention the fact that a considerable amount of work has been done on the matter — we are not operating in a vacuum.

2.15 pm

Patsy McGlone talked about the approach that was taken on the issue of plastic bags in Great Britain. We must ensure that we progress along similar lines. Across the UK, 22 major retailers and six trade associations, which are the main providers of plastic bags, agreed to a voluntary scheme with the Government to reduce plastic bag usage. Some of the by-product of that voluntary co-operation has been quite significant.

Mr McGlone also mentioned the Marks and Spencer scheme, which has led, by way of a voluntary agreement, to a large reduction in plastic bags. The DUP diverts slightly from the motion on that point. The issue must be tackled clearly and strongly. In principle, there must be a culture change among consumers, and that must happen in co-operation with major retailers. A levy should be used as a last resort. A more productive route exists that must be tried, at least initially, by major retailers. We must test that route to its conclusion before we can decide whether a direct levy or tax is required.

Mr McGlone also spoke about the introduction of a tax on plastic bags in the South. That levy was imposed at a time of economic affluence. This side of the House is loath to move beyond voluntary arrangements to enforce a compulsory levy at a time when there is a level of recession. That would be an extra tax for people to pay.

Questions remain over the efficacy of a compulsory levy. How will it be enforced? Will it create a level of

bureaucracy? Will the tax cost more to collect than it would generate? We must try to work collectively towards a system that sees the plastic bag as a thing of the past. I agree with Daithí McKay in that regard. That process involves convincing people to find alternatives. We are loath to see a compulsory levy imposed at this stage.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. I am slightly confused by some of his comments, because they seem to contradict the DUP's position. It was not so long ago, in the 'Belfast Telegraph', that the Member for South Antrim William McCrea said that he would be extremely supportive of a tax on plastic bags. At that time, he said that we would raise the matter at the Assembly when it resumed. Clearly, the DUP is divided on the issue of a tax on plastic bags.

Mr Weir: Clearly, our party is not divided on the issue. Let us remember when those remarks were made.

We must search for a situation that removes the need for plastic bags from society. At this stage, we are keen to ensure that no additional financial burden is placed on the consumer by way of a compulsory tax. We must bear in mind the financial situation. The best way forward is a voluntary scheme. To that end, we are keen to see co-operation across the Chamber on a set of proposals that can capture the full support of the House. The proposals should not be based on enforcing a compulsory burden, but on moving to a voluntary system and creating incentives.

We urge the Members opposite not to support the motion, but to seek agreement on a cross-party motion, which would carry the support of all Members of the House. That is a much more productive way in which to tackle the issue.

Mr McClarty: Some might argue that in light of some of our current problems, this is a trivial matter. It is true that we face many pressing issues, which must be addressed by a functional Executive. However, I contend that the issue is of much importance. In the past 50 to 100 years, we have done untold damage to our natural habitats because of our ever-increasing throwaway culture.

Plastic bags have contributed to decades of rubbish creation, and have done untold damage to our environment and wildlife. They are a relatively recent phenomenon, having being introduced in 1957. Today, however, around a million plastic bags are used across the world every minute. The average working life of a plastic bag, as we have heard, is about 12 minutes, and it is estimated that everyone in the world uses around 300 plastic bags annually.

The effect of plastic bags on wildlife can be devastating. It is estimated that more than a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals and sea turtles die every year from mistakenly eating or becoming entangled

in plastic. There are approximately 46,000 pieces of plastic floating in every square mile of our oceans.

Closer to home, I am sure that many of us have seen, after the recent floods, numerous plastic bags washed on to the banks of our rivers. That highlights the fact that we do not often see the real extent of our problems. Plastic bags do not biodegrade, but break down into toxic pieces that can contaminate our waterways and soil. It is, therefore, vital that, in order to protect our natural habitat, we take appropriate action to reduce the number of plastic bags in our landfill sites and countryside.

Plastic bags that litter our countryside can also have a detrimental effect on tourism. There is nothing more discouraging or off-putting than seeing plastic bags stuck in fences and hedges, or floating in streams in our countryside. In Europe, particularly in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Italy and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, there is some form of levy on the use of plastic bags. The Republic of Ireland has placed a tax on plastic bags since 2002, which has resulted in a 90% drop in consumption — approximately a billion fewer bags are being used there each year.

So far, the United Kingdom has opted for a more voluntary process, with major retailers often encouraging their shoppers not to use plastic bags. That approach is to be commended, but a more uniform scheme must be considered in order to make the required impact. There have also been calls for an outright ban on the use of plastic bags. As the motion states, the French have decided to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags by 2010. That is a commendable action, but we must fully explore what is most appropriate for Northern Ireland, taking into consideration the powers of the Minister and the Executive.

There is a real need for a more uniform approach to reducing the number of plastic bags in circulation in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that we take the correct action. The amount of waste that we produce and dump is unprecedented in human history. Plastic bags form a significant toxic and fundamentally unnecessary part of that waste, and we should do all that we can to reduce their number. We must take into consideration initiatives that have been taken elsewhere in Europe and throughout the world, and implement the most appropriate action here in the Province. That may mean working within a UK-wide framework.

The Minister has stated his controversial opinions on some aspects of environmental policy. The main thrust of the motion, however, is sensible and necessary, and I look forward to the Minister's response and elaboration on some of those issues. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: I congratulate Daithí McKay and Cathal Boylan on securing the debate, and I wish to be clear that the United Community group supports the motion

as introduced. Mr McKay has comprehensively outlined the case for action — and not just voluntary action. Patsy McGlone, speaking as Chairperson of the Environment Committee, stated that the previous Minister of the Environment had been minded to go along with a voluntary approach across the UK as a whole. It is clear that that voluntary approach has not succeeded in meeting the need to deal seriously with the scourge of plastic bags.

I noted with some amusement that in his international comparisons, Daithí McKay referred not only to action in advanced western nations such as Denmark and Ireland, but to the action that was taken by Bangladesh. If Bangladesh, with its limited economic development, can recognise the need to get rid of plastic bags, surely that should be appreciated in this region.

There has also been action in Australia and the UK. However, although voluntary action has achieved a certain amount, it has failed to address the plastic bag problem properly. That is why the motion requires support and why the Department of the Environment's expressed preference for voluntary action is inadequate.

All the EU directives on landfill, packaging or packaging waste show a clear need to get rid of plastic bags in a methodical and organised manner and show that voluntary action is inadequate.

When he made an intervention earlier, Simon Hamilton spoke about people buying bin liners if they could not get free plastic carrier bags. That makes the case for comprehensive action, because if people have to buy bin liners, they will be less inclined to use them than they would the plastic bags that supermarket checkout girls — and they are mostly girls — dish out by the dozen, regardless of whether they are required. That is why comprehensive action is required.

The action of certain major retailers to try to reduce the use of plastic bags is welcome, be that the charging regime introduced by B&Q in Scotland and Marks and Spencer in Northern Ireland, or the reduction of the price of bags for life. A bag for life is not the solution — the solution is for people to get one, two or three bags for life and use them. There is no point in someone getting a bag for life and not using it or being reluctant to use it in a rival supermarket. Supermarkets should be told that there is competition, and if that means taking a Co-operative bag into ASDA, so be it.

The voluntary initiatives are good and deliver a certain amount, but the culture change that Peter Weir and others mentioned is unlikely unless there is compulsion for it to happen. For example, household recycling rates demonstrate that although easy voluntary activity and encouragement achieve a certain amount, they eventually reach a plateau; we cannot make the further gains that are required by appealing to people's better nature.

There is no compulsion on anyone to pay a plastic-bag levy. The solution is to make plastic bags unavailable — customers should take a bag for life with them or use a cardboard box if the supermarket offers that alternative. To say that a plastic-bag levy is a further tax that cannot be avoided in a time of difficulty does not stack up — anyone can avoid the tax on a plastic bag by ensuring that they have an alternative method of carrying their shopping home.

The experience in the Republic is most telling on the issue of litter. Due to their lifespan, some plastic bags still decorate hedgerows in the Republic, but the situation is far worse in Northern Ireland. That can be remedied only by getting rid of plastic bags, not by considering biodegradable bags.

A private Member's Bill in Scotland has not made progress, so we can take action to be ahead of the rest of the UK and use the example of plastic bags to demonstrate our commitment to deal with the scourge of pollution.

Mr Hamilton: The motion is one for which I have tremendous sympathy. The volume of plastic bags that we use is a cause for concern, not just due to their inappropriate use of scarce resources or because they do not degrade and so pollute our countryside, but because they contribute to the death of many birds, sea mammals and other creatures.

I represent Strangford, which takes its name from the biggest sea inlet in the entire British Isles. Strangford Lough has almost every available environmental designation and accreditation for wildlife, birds, and so on. Therefore, I see clearly the problems that the misuse of plastic bags causes.

When a tax on plastic bags was introduced in the Irish Republic, I was drawn to the idea. Many people were understandably attracted to the idea, particularly when, initially, the tax reduced the number of plastic bags that supermarket shoppers used. I do not deny that a problem that must be tackled seriously exists. However, the question is whether a Government-led tax or levy is the answer.

2.30 pm

That question is particularly pertinent now. In the current economic climate, I am uneasy about the introduction of a tax on businesses or individuals. Given the emerging pressures on our Budget, the cost to introduce and implement such a levy may be difficult to absorb. Evidence from a report that the Scottish Parliament's then Environment and Rural Development Committee produced outlines the costs that would likely be incurred were a plastic-bag levy introduced. Set-up costs were estimated at between £3 million and £4 million. Ongoing yearly costs were estimated at around £3.5 million. Many of those are fixed costs. Therefore, it is not simply the case that, because it is

smaller than Scotland, Northern Ireland's costs should be only a third of Scotland's costs. Northern Ireland would incur many of those same fixed costs.

Northern Ireland has had time to examine the success of the Irish scheme. Although there has been a reduction in the use of bags —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree with the wise words of the former Committee for the Environment member Mr Gardiner, who said that the plastic-bag tax in the Irish Republic did not work because, after an initial dip in their use, plastic-bag use began to rise? That is not a route that the Assembly wants to go down.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. The analysis that he attributes to Mr Gardiner is a wise one. During an earlier intervention that I made in the debate, I said that the increase in the purchase of bin liners, nappy sacks, and so on, demonstrates that people do not reuse the plastic bags that they get in supermarkets but buy alternatives instead.

Obviously, the Assembly recognises the problem. Initial sympathy for implementation of the Irish scheme, and of schemes in continental Europe, was down to the fact that, until then, little evidence existed that showed that supermarkets recognised the problem, or that they would do anything to deal with it. Since then, however, as a result of political pressure, supermarkets have rolled out various voluntary schemes that have, to different extents, started to work. Most supermarkets now provide degradable bags. Sainsbury's, for example, has introduced compostable bags and bags that are made of recycled plastic.

Tesco and Marks and Spencer have introduced schemes. Indeed, Mark and Spencer's scheme was piloted in Northern Ireland to great success. Both of those schemes have resulted in a significant drop in the use of plastic bags. The National Trust, which introduced a charge for its plastic bags, has reported a 90% drop in use. IKEA was mentioned earlier in the debate. Lidl, which has a growing market share, has always charged for its bags, leading one comedian to remark that its bags cost more than its beans.

Voluntary schemes are, therefore, in place. Time is needed to determine whether they will work. Those schemes have at least been implemented, but they may not work to the extent that we would like. Some of them are quite new and fresh. Let us see whether they work.

The Minister must keep the matter under review, and the Assembly must allow itself time to determine whether the voluntary schemes are working. The Minister should retain the necessary power to implement a levy, should he believe that to be appropriate at any given time. Whether or not a levy is imposed, the issue

requires, above all, a culture change in society that should be led by retailers and backed up by Members as individuals, never mind as political representatives.

I concur with my colleague Mr Weir that, in tackling the problem, the Assembly should, only as a last resort, move away from encouraging voluntary measures to imposing a compulsory Government-led levy.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to talk about a levy on plastic bags, and I thank my colleague for helping to table the motion.

The previous Minister of the Environment suggested that imposing a tax on plastic bags was an option for the Assembly. I welcomed that statement, and I hope that the present Minister takes it on board.

Plastic bags are more than a blight on the environment. If the Assembly is to take the issue of waste management seriously and try to address it, new ways must be found to decrease, reuse and recycle plastic as part of an overall strategy. From manufacture to disposal, and as Members are only too aware, plastic carrier bags have an adverse impact on the environment.

Whether in the countryside, cities, towns or villages, plastic bags create an unsightly mess, as they cling to hedges, trees, lamp posts and telephone or electric cables. Some schoolchildren are present in the Public Gallery, and I commend schools, councils and others on their initiatives to address the problem of litter. However, that is only one measure to reduce the visual impact on the environment, and incentives and legislation must be considered to address the wider issue.

Plastic bags must be taken into account when developing an environmental waste strategy, because they take between 400 and 1,000 years to decompose in landfill sites. The Minister is aware of the burden that local councils will face in years to come. During previous debates in the Chamber, he was quick to pass on that burden to the super-councils of the future, but the Assembly has a responsibility to examine the issue now. The resin used in the production of plastic bags means that Sinn Féin is totally opposed to their incineration.

Some Members mentioned that plastic is a menace to marine life, whether fish, seals or birds, and mentioned the effect on their areas. On a recent visit to Strangford Lough, MLAs saw at first hand the impact on marine life.

It is time to act to reverse the scenarios that I outlined, and the motion to deter the use of plastic bags should be the first course of action. The average shopper uses eight bags every week, and I suggest that the average family uses even more. Many major retailers already recognise the need to reduce, and eventually eradicate, the use of plastic bags. Some charge for bags, others are well on their way to doing so, and some provide recycling options. Many major stores encourage their

customers by giving out reusable, eco-friendly bags, and that is welcome. By ensuring that a levy is imposed that will make all customers of every shop think twice about using plastic bags, the Assembly can help those stores and send a message to others to follow suit.

Members know about the scenario in the South, some European countries have committed to the introduction of a levy to combat the scourge of plastic, and others have decided on a complete ban. Although a levy alone cannot solve the problem, it could go some way to doing so. The Assembly must take the first step to combat a major scourge on the environment by supporting the motion, and I ask the House to do so. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: This is yet another take-note debate in a legislative Assembly that is neither making laws nor functioning properly. Ironically, that is mainly because of the party to which the motion's proposers belong. Let us not forget that we should be making legislation to enact change.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that if the issue of plastic bags were a priority, the party opposite would enable an Executive meeting to take place in order to secure action, rather than proposing an empty debate?

Mr Beggs: I agree entirely; pretend politics must end. Members were elected to a legislative Assembly, not to a talking-shop Assembly that is hamstrung by mutual veto.

Although the text of the motion is somewhat contradictory, on balance, I support its sentiments. It notes, with approval, the French model of an outright ban, while simultaneously calling for the introduction of a plastic-bag levy.

The motion is timely. The leaves are falling off the trees, and, in the hedgerows, evidence of the damage caused to the environment by plastic bags is blatantly obvious. Other Members have said that approximately one trillion plastic bags are produced and disposed of each year. Less than 1% are recycled — disposal is cheaper. That issue must be researched. Perhaps there is a need for a tax to change that. Financial pressures do apply.

Over time, plastic bags break down into smaller, more toxic petro-polymers that eventually contaminate soils and waterways and enter the food chain. The effect on wildlife can be catastrophic: birds become terminally entangled, and the World Wildlife Fund estimates that almost 200 different species of sea life — including whales, dolphins, seals and turtles — die after ingesting plastic bags that they mistake for food.

Even our Environment Minister must acknowledge the consensus and address this well-known problem. In recent years, towns in the UK have, effectively, banned the sale of plastic bags through community action. Furthermore, education is vital. Some people — myself

included — now decline plastic bags when offered one at a shop counter. Everyone can, individually, take action and drive progress — it is not solely the responsibility of big Government. I pay tribute to the voluntary action of tens of thousands of citizens who support the concept of a bag for life by reusing plastic bags or environmentally friendly bags.

The Republic of Ireland must receive credit for being the first country to introduce a plastic-bag tax, which is a measure that has, undoubtedly, influenced people's behaviour. However, the Assembly should not simply copy that. Although that measure caused plastic-bag usage to decrease to approximately 85 million a year, that figure had risen to approximately 115 million bags by 2005 and continues to rise.

At the other end of the spectrum, the 'Daily Mail' has championed the idea of banning plastic bags completely, citing the example of the impending ban in France in 2010. However, the practical reality of imposing a nationwide ban on plastic-bag production must be considered carefully. Will the law of unintended consequences come into play? What carbon footprint and transport costs will alternatives create? It is important that the Assembly consider how any ban would affect the carbon footprint. Such issues must be considered before an ultimate judgement is reached.

Her Majesty's Government have been pressuring retailers to change and encouraging voluntary action. However, we must determine whether that voluntary action is working. Perhaps the Minister can update the House on its progress. The motion calls on the Minister to introduce legislation to introduce a levy. However, the Assembly does not have tax-raising powers, and that area may have to be worked through. I am not ruling it out.

Although I support the motion — as all Members should — the Assembly must do more than talk about the issue. It must take action, enact legislation and educate people to use plastic bags sparingly or avoid using them at all.

2.45 pm

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the motion and commend Daithí McKay and Cathal Boylan for proposing it.

Unfortunately, as other Members mentioned, the present debate is merely a discussion because the Executive is not meeting. Therefore, we may not have the action that we should have had if all the Members of the Executive were behaving responsibly.

When the Minister attended the Environment Committee in July, he indicated that he intended to hold a consultation on plastic bags in the autumn. We are now heading into winter, but I hope that the Minister will stick to his word and not make a U-turn on this

important issue. That would only add to the list of DUP U-turns that so exercise Mr Jim Allister.

Plastic bags, we have been told, are used in the great majority of cases for only five or 10 minutes. In all cases, however, they can take hundreds of years to decompose. Therefore, this is an important issue. I support the motion, and my party supports a levy on plastic bags similar to that which operates in the Republic of Ireland. It is time that we followed the Southern example. As we heard from the Minister yesterday, the environment recognises no borders. Neither hares, nor birds nor fish recognise the border.

This is another example of an initiative that should be conducted on an island-wide basis. "Reduce, reuse and recycle" is an important strategy that reduces the amount of waste that goes into landfill, and there are many other successful initiatives. However, the levy on plastic carrier bags is the one that has been most successful. It is a very simple initiative, introduced, I believe, in 2003 by the Irish Government — the first Government to do so. Despite the concerns expressed by some DUP Members, the levy has hurt no one. It was introduced at the rate of 15 cents on each plastic bag, and now stands at 22 cents. Retailers supported the scheme and the public were enthusiastic about it.

When the scheme was introduced, it was calculated that every inhabitant used more than 300 plastic bags per year. After the levy, surveys showed that usage was reduced to five plastic bags per capita per year. The scheme is administered through the VAT system in the South and operates easily. After the first five months, and after costs were accounted for, it showed a return of €3.5 million. That money goes into an environment fund which supports a range of initiatives, including research and development into waste management, promotion of environmental awareness, and education and training programmes.

People here have watched what has happened in the Republic of Ireland: they have seen the scheme succeeding, and accept that plastic bags have a negative impact on the environment. The unsightliness and ugliness of plastic bags, the harm they cause to wildlife, and the dangers to livestock — all have been referred to. The public are, therefore, ready to play their part in contributing to a cleaner environment and to reducing waste.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up, and I am glad that he did not recommend passports for the Irish hare.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I welcome the debate. I suppose that it is a sign of the change that has taken place in Northern Ireland that the party that used to be more interested in plastic explosives is now interested in plastic bags. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Minister. You cannot say that.

The Minister of the Environment: My remarks are on the record now anyway, so I can get on with it. *[Laughter.]*

During the debate, Members talked about the need to change peoples' behaviour and attitudes to ensure that waste is reduced. Some said that I, the Executive or the retailers should do something about that. However, at the end of the day, it all comes down to personal responsibility, of which I see fine examples as I look around the Assembly Chamber. As Members listen to and engage in this debate, they might take a drink of water from a glass — except the Members from Sinn Féin. Instead of using glasses, which are reusable receptacles, those Members use plastic, throwaway cups — the type of material that pollutes the environment. That is the very type of action that the proposer of this motion said that he wants people in Northern Ireland to do less.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Minister. You are behaving badly today.

The Minister of the Environment: I thought that I would get a few things off my mind before I start talking about the issues.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister confirm that he is using a reusable speech? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: None of my speeches are reusable by anyone. Most people would not want to use them again anyway. *[Laughter.]*

The issue is a serious one. As I drove here this morning, I saw that someone had thrown out a bag of rubbish instead of waiting for the bin man to arrive at their home. For approximately 100 yards down the road from where I live, the hedge was littered with plastic bags that had been blown there by the wind. That is the type of problem that plastic bags cause. Members have highlighted the impact that plastic bags have on the environment, the countryside, wildlife, farm animals, etc, and the Assembly should deal with that issue.

Members' speeches contained numerous themes. Some asked what I and the Department are doing to address the problem. I noticed that the proposer of the motion talked about the need for the Department and for me, as the Minister, to be proactive. Perhaps he should do his homework before he proposes motions, or he should at least check some of the facts that are available. As the Chairman of the Environment Committee and Mr Gallagher pointed out, I have discussed this matter with the Environment Committee. As far as I can remember, the proposer of the motion attended that meeting.

At that meeting, I made it clear that I and the Department had taken a number of actions. The Department, the UK Government and other

Administrations across the United Kingdom have entered into an agreement with retailers. Through voluntary action, we aim to reduce plastic-bag use by 25% by December this year. A course of action has been put in place. One of the initiatives that will help to achieve that target is for retailers to implement bag-for-life schemes. As several Members mentioned, some retailers have already implemented such schemes.

The fact is — and I have already made this point with regard to the behaviour of the proposer of the motion and his plastic cup, of which I thought I should remind him —

Mr Boylan: The cup is recyclable.

The Minister of the Environment: It does not matter whether the cup is recyclable, although I do not believe that it says on them that they are biodegradable. However, that can be checked, and if the Member has misled the House I am sure that he will be prepared to apologise for it.

The Member for South Antrim David Ford said that, although people sometimes feel good that they have done their bit for the environment by buying a bag-for-life, they often fail to use it. However, of the 40% of shoppers who bought bags-for-life, only 12% regularly used them. Therefore, although it is important for people to perform such good actions, we must ensure that their behaviour is changed in order that we see a real benefit from those actions.

Had Mr McKay been listening when I attended the Committee for the Environment, he would know that I made it quite clear that I asked the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Minister in the United Kingdom to include Northern Ireland in the Climate Change Bill [HL]. That would give the Assembly the power to make enabling legislation in order to introduce regulations to deal with the plastic-bag issue if and when we saw fit, by imposing levies if necessary. Therefore, it cannot be suggested that my Department has not taken action.

The Department has spent money on engaging people in order to change their behaviour and attitudes, through activities such as going into schools and offering an education process. Bryson House has carried out some excellent work on that issue for the Department. As part of the waste management strategy, a senior information officer is due to be appointed by the Department in approximately one month's time, and that person will implement a communications strategy for dealing with waste management.

Therefore, the Department has not been dilatory. However, as the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs pointed out, even if the enabling legislation was available, no legislation or regulations could be introduced because of the actions of the party opposite. I believe that it was a colleague of the Member in the party opposite

who asked why I did not have at least some consultation on the issue. The Member well knows that before I can begin consultation on any piece of legislation or regulation, I must get it passed by the Executive. However, the Executive is not meeting, and the reason why the Executive is not meeting is, of course, because Sinn Féin is in a bit of strump at the moment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order; the Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of the Environment: I do not mind Sinn Féin Members shouting at me. I would be worried if they were not shouting at me because I would think that I was saying something wrong.

My Department has taken action on the issue, and, as Sinn Féin Members know, for new legislation — not administrative action — to be introduced, consultation has first to be agreed by the Executive. However, because the Executive is not meeting, there are many pieces of legislation that cannot be consulted on.

Furthermore, when action is taken, it must be effective. Three courses of action have been suggested in the debate. The first, as mentioned in the motion, is the ban on plastic bags that was introduced by the French Government. That ban, of course, applies to only non-biodegradable plastic bags. Information and legal advice provided to my Department indicates that such a ban would be illegal under EU legislation. I could bore Members with all the details of that, but I am not going to — it is article 18 of the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive.

3.00 pm

Given that I am not a Europhile of any sort, there might be some attraction for me to introduce a measure that would defy EU regulations. However, according to the legal advice that we have received, banning plastic bags would not stand up to EU law.

Much has been said about the success of the levy on plastic bags in the Irish Republic. Although plastic-bag usage there initially fell, we must consider the facts since then. Following that initial fall, usage has increased by approximately 50%. The Republic's levy has gathered revenue amounting to €110 million, which, at 15 cents per bag, equates to 733 million plastic bags. Therefore, the levy has not been effective in reducing the overall number of bags used. Indeed, the revenue raised by the tax increased from €7 million in 2002 to €17.5 million in 2004. I thank the Member for Upper Bann Mr Gardiner, who, as the Ulster Unionist Party's environment spokesman, included those figures in a press release.

The evidence does not clearly demonstrate that imposing a levy produces a permanent effect. There may be an initial effect because, at such a time, there is likely to be a lot of advertising and media attention

— communication was mentioned by the Member for East Antrim and several Members from my party. If we are to engender real change, we must change the culture, so that someone who brings water into the Chamber will use a glass rather than a plastic cup.

Similarly, this morning, I bought two books in a shop and, automatically, the girl handed me a plastic bag. I did not require a plastic bag, and I did not take it, but —

Mr Kennedy: What sort of books were they? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: I can assure the Member that they were not the sort of books that would be sold in a brown paper bag. *[Laughter.]*

It is in such matters that an attitudinal change must occur. I am not sure whether the voluntary agreement will work. All I can say is that, so far, the evidence demonstrates that, at least, it has had some success. Shops that have attempted to implement voluntary agreements — and which, consequently, are pushing the issue — have reported a drop in plastic-bag usage of approximately 40%. It remains to be seen how such initiatives will develop in the long term, but we will monitor the situation.

Nevertheless, regulation always has costs attached. My philosophy for Government is that the least amount of regulation that we impose on people, and the more that we can bring people along and persuade them to do the right thing, the better. Regulation is irksome, it sometimes brings unintended side effects and, as the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton said, it is not without costs. The Member indicated that regulation for the plastic-bag tax would cost approximately £3.5 million.

I have no doubt that I, and my Department, will return to this matter. There is no easy answer to the problem; no one-off requirement will deal with it, and measures other than the simple approach outlined by the proposer of the motion are required. Despite Mr McKay's scepticism, I wish to make it clear to him that my Department has been proactive. We take this matter seriously, and we will use whatever means we can — including, for example, this debate — to get the message across to the public that they should attempt to use carrier bags that are more sustainable and less polluting to the environment.

Mr Beggs: The Minister said that we should not rule out anything. Does he accept that a tax on bags should not be ruled out and that such a tax might well form a useful tool, along with education, in changing the behaviour of individuals? Furthermore, does he agree that we must ensure that we do not waste valuable resources or pollute the environment?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member knows that I have difficulty with taxes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have difficulty with time. The Minister's time is up.

The Minister of the Environment: I will not rule out anything, but I have informed the House of the difficulties that I have with the approach that the Member has suggested.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It has been a colourful debate. I thank Mr McKay and Mr Boylan for tabling the motion and Members for their contributions. Everyone agreed that plastic bags are a scourge on the environment, particularly on marine life. Sinn Féin has pushed for a levy on plastic bags for a number of years with successive direct rule Ministers, such as Mr Rooker and Angela Smith, and with Dermot Nesbitt, Arlene Foster and, now, the current Minister of the Environment.

Daithí McKay mentioned the many countries that have introduced levies and other initiatives to reduce the number of bags that are used. Mr McKay suggested the South of Ireland and France as good models for us to follow.

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee, Patsy McGlone, also said that the South of Ireland was a good model to follow. He said that the levy in the South had led to a 90% reduction in the number of carrier bags distributed. He also said that many retailers in the North have reduced the number of plastic bags by 70% through their own initiatives.

There were many contradictions among the DUP Members, particularly in the —

Ms S Ramsey: — Front Bench and Back Benches. *[Laughter.]*

Mr W Clarke: It seems that they have lost touch with district councils and district councillors. I tabled a motion in Down District Council to introduce a levy, and it was supported by MLA Wells, who is also a member of that council. As a member of NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association), Peter Weir will know how all district councils feel about the issue. I am sure that Sammy Wilson has backed such a motion as well.

Peter Weir mentioned the damage to wildlife and marine life, and he said that he favoured the implementation of a voluntary approach. He stated that consumer behaviour had to change, and he is reluctant to impose a levy. Mr Weir also talked about the current financial situation, and he said that it would be wrong to impose a levy at this time. Bearing in mind how long it takes to progress legislation, only God knows what situation the economy will be in by the time any law is in place.

Not only are plastic bags and excess packaging bad for the environment, they are bad for one's pocket. Studies that were carried out last year show that excess

packaging costs the average family £470 a year. Excess packaging hits the pocket.

Simon Hamilton was also concerned about the damage that plastic bags cause to wildlife. He said that he was uneasy about introducing a levy and that supermarkets were rolling out their own voluntary schemes. He mentioned the initiatives that Lidl and IKEA, for instance, have introduced, and said that time was required to judge their effectiveness.

Cathal Boylan said that a previous Minister had said that a tax on plastic bags was an option. He also said that councils and schools should be commended for their approach. Councils are leading the way. The Assembly is supposed to be introducing the legislation to take along councils, but councillors and councils are telling us the way to go. The tail is wagging the dog.

Roy Beggs talked about the damage that plastic bags cause to wildlife and the environment. He said that education was required and that individuals can take more action by refusing a plastic bag when offered.

Tommy Gallagher stated that we should follow the South of Ireland and introduce a levy; he said that the public was ready for that.

David McClarty said that, over the decades, we have destroyed our environment through our throw-away culture. He was also concerned about the damage caused to marine life and said that we must look at best practice throughout Europe for a solution in the North of Ireland — and not just for plastic bags.

David Ford said that a voluntary solution was welcome, but that it did not go far enough. He said that those consumers who take their bags and boxes with them when they do their shopping would not feel the effect of a levy. I hope that I have covered everyone — I will now give the Minister a go. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: I would have been disappointed if the Member had not.

Mr W Clarke: I will not be too hard on him. The Minister was seeking a 25% reduction in the use of plastic carrier bags and, if I took him up correctly, he was talking about that happening voluntarily. He also talked about a bag-for-life initiative and said that education was the key. However, I am disappointed with that response. The Minister had an opportunity to send a clear message that the North would follow what the South of Ireland had done and lead the way on the issue throughout the world.

As I said earlier, the issue does not involve just the present Minister; it involved his predecessors, including Mrs Arlene Foster. They have done nothing and, judging by what I heard from the opposite Benches today, it looks as though nothing will be done. It appears that the Minister is content to rely on voluntary agreements with large retailers.

It has been widely accepted that the legislation in the South was hugely successful in reducing the use of plastic carrier bags, in changing public opinion and in promoting a responsible attitude to waste. A plastic-bag levy in the Twenty-six Counties was supported by the public and the same would happen in the North. Several retailers charge for food carrier bags in their stores throughout the Six Counties, which has led to a reduction in the use of plastic bags and raised more than £80,000 for Groundwork to use in environmental projects.

Although such initiatives are welcome and should be encouraged, we can only match the reductions made in the Twenty-six Counties by introducing a levy. Local authorities across the Six Counties have passed motions in support of a levy on plastic carrier bags. The public — and schoolchildren — are taking the lead on the issue. We are asked continually to reduce, reuse and recycle, yet the Minister, who should lead by example, will not even consider introducing legislation — or even drawing it up to introduce to the Executive. It is all very well for him to say that the Executive are not meeting; however, he should go to the Bill Office and do the paperwork, which should take him some time.

The legislation could create employment for businesses to expand and for community initiatives to develop. If the only opposition to the motion is based on job losses and the credit crisis, can we assume that the Minister and his party colleagues support the motion in principle? Will the Minister investigate the potential for job creation, business expansion and the benefits to the community? Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports, in principle, a levy on plastic carrier bags and notes the French Government's decision to ban non-biodegradable plastic bags by 2010; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward legislation, as a matter of priority, to introduce a levy on plastic carrier bags and to develop a plan to phase out their use.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Forest and Woodland Targets

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.

3.15 pm

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The motion calls on the Minister to provide information. Unless I am missing something, there is no sign of any Minister of any kind on the opposite Benches. Can you advise us what will happen at the conclusion of the debate when the Minister should be called to respond?

Mr Deputy Speaker: A message has been sent to the Minister, so if the Member wishes, I will wait until she appears.

Ms S Ramsey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has just arrived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wells, you will be pleased to hear that the Minister has just arrived.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the limited target set in the Programme for Government for increasing the area of forest and woodland; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that are in place to achieve the 2006 Forestry Strategy target of doubling woodland cover in the next fifty years.

I am pleased that the Minister has rushed from her maternity bed to be here, and I thank her for her attendance.

The motion focuses on the targets set in the Programme for Government and by the Executive for forest and woodland cover. As I understand it, tree cover in Northern Ireland accounts for only 6% of the total landscape. That figure is low, particularly when compared to mainland UK, where tree cover is 12% — double that in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I am told that the European Union average is an impressive 44%. However, at some stage, I want the Minister to confirm whether the figure of 6% for Northern Ireland is accurate. Perhaps we are working with out-of-date figures. Where do the figures come from? Are they based on a yearly census of woodland or forest cover in Northern Ireland?

It is not enough to simply implement a plan to double Northern Ireland tree cover in 50 years. It is a huge undertaking. The successful implementation of the scheme will require impeccable planning, training, investment and regular monitoring to achieve the targets that are laid down.

Figures released show that, under the Programme for Government commitment, 550 hectares a year will be planted by 2011, which means that, overall, 1,650 hectares will be planted between 2008 and 2011. That target is not only insufficient, but it shows a lack of the desire that is needed to ensure that the potential of the overall scheme is recognised. Figures from the Woodland Trust show that in order to meet the commitment in the Northern Ireland forestry strategy to double woodland cover over 50 years, 1,740 hectares a year would have to be planted. That is over three and a half times the figure of 550 that is suggested under the Programme for Government commitment.

Therefore, it is not sufficient to opt for a slow start of planting 550 hectares a year, with the hope of an increase over time. Such an approach puts the Province on the back foot from the outset. Compare those figures to, say, those for the Republic of Ireland, which is on target to increase its tree cover from 10% to 15% within 10 years. By contrast, the scheme in Northern Ireland is somewhat lacking. The scheme must be considered as part of an overall picture, and its potential advantages must be studied in detail to determine what impact it could, and should, have for the people of Northern Ireland now and in the years to come.

If successfully implemented, the scheme will not only provide the people of Northern Ireland with recreation areas that match that of the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe, but, more importantly, it will play a major role in the campaign to renew our habitat. As Members, we must accept the responsibility that has been placed upon us by the people. We must lead in a positive manner, not only on issues concerning the economy and social concerns, but as defenders of Northern Ireland's natural surroundings, which bond our people in a spirit of appreciation and thankfulness for the beauty around us. It is imperative that the Department plays its role in accepting the leadership challenge by taking action now to address the very relaxed attitude to the scheme and allow it to reach its full potential.

Although it is vital that the people of Northern Ireland as a whole should benefit from the scheme, it is also very important that the individuals who can make the scheme a real success understand the benefit that it will bring. There is no doubt in my mind that farmers, in particular, could be the key deliverers of the scheme. As Members will be aware, without the help and co-operation of the farmers, it will not only be improbable that the targets will be achieved; it will be impossible to achieve them.

It is imperative that a scheme aimed at increasing woodland cover benefits farmers and the agricultural economy. The farming community must be involved in the process, but one-off payments are not enough. Ongoing financial support must be given to the farming community. A scheme will fail if it is implemented merely

with the aim of providing more trees. It is paramount that any scheme contributes positively to the long-term financial sustainability of the agriculture sector and the wider economy, and that it has major positive effects on the environment.

Farmers have an important role to play in the implementation of any successful scheme. That is highlighted by the interesting fact that the area of forestry and woodland could be doubled if theories on extensive farming practices were promoted nationally. However, that may not produce the type of forestry and woodland that is appropriate to the forestry industry or that would benefit the Northern Ireland population by providing leisure facilities and environmental improvements. Our aim is to create an overarching scheme that will benefit all sectors and all people.

Other parts of the industry can benefit greatly from some of the schemes. The forestry sector has traditionally made a large contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. For example, many people in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone are employed by Balcas, a timber production company. However, that company's production plant has been reduced to a three-day working week by the ongoing downturn in the economy. An efficiently run scheme could ensure that there is a large enough supply of wood to maintain employment levels in the forestry sector. It could also keep companies such as Balcas in a high supply of natural timber.

The global demand for hardwoods is greater than the supply of the necessary materials. A change in planting patterns from coniferous trees to broadleaved trees — which produce hardwoods — could help to make Northern Ireland's hardwood production more globally competitive. There is a growing realisation that more action needs to be taken to address global warming effectively. The introduction of carbon credits could have an extremely positive impact in the Province. Northern Ireland could become more competitive if we were to introduce carbon credits and implement a scheme to increase tree planting — one that is more significant than the annual planting of 500 hectares of woodland.

I ask the Minister to clarify whether Northern Ireland's new planting targets form part of the United Kingdom Government's strategy to reduce CO₂; and if not, why not? Other Governments, including the Republic of Ireland's Government, incorporate woodland expansion into their mechanisms to reduce CO₂. The Minister and her Department should examine that matter urgently. The EU has banned carbon trading, so woodland owners could lease the scheme until 2013. Indeed, a number of Whitehall committees on climate change are considering the feasibility of a trading scheme for woodland carbon trading. Will the Minister confirm what stage that consideration is at and whether state bodies such as the Forest Service will be able to benefit from a potential trading scheme?

The implementation of a successful scheme would be incredibly beneficial to the economy and environment of Northern Ireland and to the health of its people. Access to forest recreation areas would allow members of our community to experience better physical and mental health. It would also enhance our natural surroundings and benefit the agriculture sector. The Minister has heard the voice of the people today. She must respond positively in order to address the problems that are so evident; failure to act is not an option.

Mr Irwin: Figures for forest cover in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and Europe make the case for doubling Northern Ireland's forest cover over the next 50 years appear too simplistic. Forest cover in Northern Ireland stands at little more than 6%. In Scotland, that figure is 15%; in Wales, 12%; and in England, 7%.

The availability of land and population density each play a role in calculating targets for increasing woodland cover. The spread of rural dwellings in Northern Ireland reduces the opportunity for large-scale forestation, in comparison with other countries. Northern Ireland is a compact land mass in comparison with mainland Great Britain and other EU countries.

The Programme for Government sets a target to increase forest and woodland cover by 1,650 hectares by 2011. That will not achieve the 2006 forestry strategy target of doubling Northern Ireland's woodland cover, but the incentives that are available for landowners to consider planting must also be taken into account. The Forest Service's annual report states that it will review the opportunity to promote grant-aided woodland expansion. It is within those grant-aided schemes that I believe the Forest Service has the best chance to encourage landowners to consider tree planting.

The current local drive to promote the use of alternative energy sources is another way to encourage an increase of forest cover in Northern Ireland. However, planting trees for energy creates the problem of rotation. Once the trees are planted, they are harvested within a short time, compared to long-term coniferous planting.

I concede that the target to double woodland cover in 50 years is ambitious, but increasing that cover every year is no less important, and I welcome any initiatives and strategies that encourage planting. However, any such initiatives must represent a feasible long-term commitment for landowners.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I hope that she and her baby are well.

Sinn Féin supports the motion, and I thank the Members responsible for bringing the issue of forestry and woodlands before the Assembly. The debate highlights the issues, but will bring about no real change. The opportunity for change will be presented when the

Forestry Act is amended. It must be understood that Irish farmers have a great affinity with working the land and that it is up to the Government to offer assistance and create the conditions for farmland to be converted to forest, thus doubling woodland by 2050.

Elements to be considered in a new forestry Act, to be presented early next year, are central to my contribution to the debate. Forests must become multifunctional and relevant to all our lives. Many more people must be able to use them for recreational activities and earn a living from them. Forests must be developed to provide renewable energy opportunities. Timber production is essential, but the Forest Service must be flexible about social and recreational use. The first forestry Act in more than 50 years will give the Executive, Departments and agencies the legislative authority to deliver forestry management that is fit for purpose in an ever-changing world.

I am proud to represent South Down, which is home to the majestic Mourne Mountains and, at their foot, Donard Demesne. There are several ancient and long-established woods in the area — from the native oak wood of Rostrevor, overlooking Carlingford Lough in the south of the county, to the exceptional beauty of Tollymore and Castlewellan forest parks. However, even those majestic assets are not being developed to their full potential, particularly in respect of activity tourism and, specifically, mountain biking — a recreational industry that is a multimillion-pound success story in Wales and Scotland.

There must be a coherent approach to developing the North's environment and biodiversity, and the foundation of that must be the preservation and expansion of woodlands. The Woodland Trust states that the North of Ireland:

"is languishing at the bottom of the European tree league. We have less woodland than almost any other country, with woods here covering a mere six per cent of the landscape, compared to the European average of 44 per cent."

The trust adds that the North of Ireland has lost 273 ancient and long-established woods since the 1960s, due to a lack of legislative protection.

We must ensure that collectively we do not allow any other long-established forests to disappear from this part of the island. I find it difficult to envisage how a long-term strategy for forests and woodlands in the North of Ireland can advance without consideration of the impact of climate change and sustainable development.

3.30 pm

We must take a strategic approach to forests and maximise their use — develop them as carbon sinks or use them to develop biomass as a source of renewable energy. We need the leadership to move the issue forward in a holistic fashion throughout all Departments. We

need to create the conditions to generate business for rural areas.

There is a need to promote healthier lifestyles to improve the poor health statistics in some parts of the region. Lack of regular exercise is known to contribute to the high incidence of circulatory disease in the North. It is widely recognised that woodlands have healing properties for people who are recovering from mental-health problems.

All Departments must be involved in the development of forests. More woodland, especially closer to residential areas, would offer a valuable setting to promote well-being. Furthermore, learning opportunities can be developed around woodlands to improve educational achievement and skills.

Go raibh maith agat. We are merely borrowing our forests from our children, so there is a great responsibility on us to hand them over to future generations in a healthier condition than when we received them and in a better condition than they are now in. All stakeholders should come to the table — timber producers, renewable energy business groups, sports groups, youth organisations and representatives from the tourism and environmental sectors.

Michelle Gildernew, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in response to a question from your good self, a LeasCheann Comhairle, stated:

“The Forestry Strategy sets out a long term aim of doubling the area of forest, from 6% to 12%, by 2050. This will be achieved primarily through afforestation of privately owned agricultural land supported by funds made available under the Rural Development Plan.

The Forestry Strategy recognised that landowners commitment to farming means that forests are likely to expand slowly at first. However, as the impact of Common Agricultural Policy reform grows and the benefits of woodland become more apparent, we expect to see the demand for growing trees to increase.”

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

Mr W Clarke: That is the crux of the matter. We must persuade the farming community to embrace woodland expansion and develop opportunities for them to utilise timber production. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her attendance. I was at another event earlier, and the Minister was there as well; she has certainly hit the ground running after her big event.

On 23 September, members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development heard a presentation from Premier Woodlands. I freely admit that until I heard that presentation, I had merely a passing interest in woodlands. However, the presentation gave us food for thought about the future of our woodlands, and we learned that in Northern Ireland, as other Members have said, there is only 6% woodland cover, which is very low. Indeed, we are listed among the least-forested

regions in Europe. The European Union average for woodland cover is more than 30%.

The reasons for our lack of tree cover could be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century when Lord Mountjoy had all the woodlands in Ulster cut down to deprive those who were opposed to English rule of hiding places. We are reaping the consequences of his scorched earth policy to this day. Lord Mountjoy felled thousands upon thousands of large native trees, such as oak, elder, elm and alder, to construct wooden forts — some of them in the Members' own territories — bridges and castles. However, it is more than 300 years since Lord Mountjoy roamed around Counties Armagh, Down, Monaghan, Tyrone and elsewhere, so we must move on to a more modern era.

In the last century, many ancient woods were cleared of noble trees and replaced by fast-growing conifers, needles and all. That was considered progress in the early twentieth century, and it took almost a further century to realise the devastating consequences of such programmes. However, let us look at Northern Ireland as it is today from a forestry and woodland point of view. When compared with what is happening in the Republic, we lag far behind despite being offered the same European support. The Government of the South avail themselves fully of the EU woodland grants scheme and the farm woodland premium scheme.

The programme here is open to challenge. Indeed, Premier Woodlands has expressed some reservations about the likelihood of the Forest Service achieving its target of doubling the acreage under trees by 2050. The Minister's response to the question that is posed in the motion in the names of Mr Ken Robinson, Mr Elliott and Mr Armstrong on the Department's strategy on forestry and woodland targets will be very interesting.

We were told that, under the terms of the rural development programme, the Forest Service must differentiate between full- and part-time farmers in order to comply with the terms of the farm woodland premium scheme, with full-time farmers being offered up to £300 a hectare and participating part-time farmers being offered £100 a hectare. Should there be a difference? After all, we are talking about planting trees and woodlands, not about who should be encouraged to plant them. It is possible that part-time farmers will be most keen to plant trees, whereas full-time farmers — most of whom live in the hope of better days ahead on the farm and a future in food production — will, understandably, be reluctant to use good, productive land to grow trees and provide woodlands. Part-timers do not have such interests.

Ongoing work will lead to the introduction of a new forestry Bill for Northern Ireland in the next 12 months. Although I welcome that, I have concerns about some of the proposals that are being mooted for inclusion in

the Bill. The Committee was told that the new Bill will allow the Forest Service to acquire land that adjoins existing woodland by use of the compulsory purchasing process. I, for one, would not agree to such a measure, nor could I accept the proposal that would give the Forest Service total control — again, by compulsory methods — of sporting and gaming rights in forested estates.

If ever there were a case of a lack of vision and of the proposers not seeing the wood for the trees, compulsory measures would certainly fit the bill. Compulsory-purchasing diktats will inevitably be challenged by landowners; farming unions; groups, such as Premier Woodlands; and the politicians who have genuine rural interests. I say to those who are dreaming up such schemes: forgo the compulsory-purchase route, as pursuing such methods will meet with stern challenges from many different sectors and will prove futile.

The new forestry Bill for Northern Ireland should offer the opportunity for this generation to make good the failings of the past, but it must not become a Government-versus-farmer Bill. Should that materialise, it would serve only to stifle the reinstatement of our woodlands to the level that we wish to achieve and to leave for future generations to enjoy and benefit from.

Mr Ford: I congratulate Mr Elliott and his colleagues on securing this debate. I welcome the motion, and my group will certainly support it. I also welcome back the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and wish her and her family all the best. That is a prelude to saying a few rude things about the Department's activities.

The Woodland Trust's recent report, 'A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland', clearly sets out some very challenging proposals, which ought to be noted not only by the Department of Agriculture, but by the whole Executive, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and by the Assembly — not merely those Members who have agricultural interests — because it is absolutely clear that there is much to do. If a new Bill is to come before the Assembly next year, there is much that the Department ought to consider for inclusion and that the Committee may need to amend as the Bill progresses.

I will highlight a few points about that, and I will try not to repeat the general points that have been made by other Members. The fact that we now have an ancient woodland inventory gives us some opportunity to start to look seriously at the conservation of that environment as well as the issue of the major strategic expansion of woodland cover.

In that respect, I was a little disappointed when I received a written answer to a question earlier this year, which related to a line in target 10 of the sustainable development strategy — which is an OFMDFM responsibility, not purely a DARD responsibility —

with the Programme for Government commitment to the doubling of woodland cover over 50 years. The answer was rather similar to that given to a Member for East Londonderry, and, if I was trying to ingratiate myself with you, I would say it was an answer to your question, Mr Speaker.

The particular bit that concerned me was the Minister's statement that:

"the Strategy acknowledged the strong commitment that farmers had to continuing farming, which meant that forests would only expand slowly at first."

There is genuine concern that, if the current level of planting is less than one third of that which is required to meet the long-term strategy, there must be serious questions as to whether the long-term strategy is viable in any sense. It would be appropriate for the Executive to re-examine that objective and state whether it is realistic. Is it purely window dressing to state a target for 2050, which, given current trends, not only will not be met, but will not be met by a significant distance?

Five hundred and fifty hectares a year, or the target of converting an additional 1,650 hectares by March 2011 — which was highlighted in an answer to an additional question that I submitted — are a long way short of the 1,700 plus hectares that would be required if progress were to be made every year. The Minister's answers raise major issues.

Today, I received answers to some other questions that I submitted, and which caused me further concern. I asked whether the Minister would restore all planted ancient woodland sites under the Forest Service's stewardship as part of the commitment to arrest biodiversity decline. The response was:

"The Department cannot restore all plantations on ancient woodland sites because there is insufficient evidence of an economic, social or environmental requirement for such a target and there are no clearly defined means by which such a target could be achieved."

What is the point of having a biodiversity strategy if a key element of the biodiversity of the region — the limited amount of ancient woodland that remains to us — is not to be protected and preserved, and if the responsible Department states that that does not tie in with any of its strategies?

Similarly, to be told in another answer that a previous publication, 'Northern Ireland Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth':

"reflects an appropriate balance between the many views expressed during the policy review",

when it will also fail to meet long-term targets, does not make a significant addition. Furthermore, to be told that even though legislation is coming:

"The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has no plans to afford absolute legislative protection to ancient and long-established woodland."

suggests to me that although there may be a driver for commercial forestry in DARD's Forest Service, there is little commitment to cross-cutting sustainability targets, which are supposed to be part of the Executive's programme.

That is also shown by the failure of OFMDFM to evaluate its sustainable development targets, and it means that the Executive have to make considerable progress before they can address the terms of the motion. I trust that if the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development cannot respond for OFMDFM, she will at least give us some greater reassurance than has been given so far in her answers to various Members.

Mr Shannon: When I think of trees, I associate them with country sports and with shooting. I am well known in the area that I represent as a keen shooting sportsman, although I will confirm on record that the rumours of my shooting 20,000 Argentinian pigeons in three days, while making me one of the greatest living marksmen in the world, are unfounded. My shoulder could not take the action.

As a member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and the Countryside Alliance, I know it to be true that the preservation of habitats and environments is often overlooked as an essential part of the ethos of country sports enthusiasts. Shooting contributes some £10 million of conservation work annually, with corresponding benefits to wildlife and to eco-tourism.

A substantial amount of conservation work is undertaken by shooters. In my area, Strangford Lough wildfowling —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member must return to the motion. He is upsetting Mr Wells.

Mr Shannon: There are primary conservation issues for people involved in the shooting sports. I say that because those are the people who plant trees, nurse them and look after them.

Laust minth tha Wudlan Trust lanchd ther vision fer wudlan in Norlin Airlan o' hoo they baleev tha Executiv shud velye, bring bak an widen oot our wudlan heritage. Tha furst lanch wuz weel tuk in, an they er noo lukin tae big oan tha momentum gethered, an tha Wudlan Trust his bin in touch wi me aboot this debate tha dae.

Last month, the Woodland Trust launched a vision for woodland in Northern Ireland, which detailed how it believed the Executive should value, restore and expand our woodland heritage. Fortunately, the launch was well received, and the Trust wishes to build on the momentum that has been gathered. I have been contacted by the Trust, as have other Members, about today's debate.

The Woodland Trust's manifesto asked the Executive and their agencies to deliver on their promise to double

woodland cover in the next 50 years. Unfortunately, neither the target that was set in the Programme for Government nor that of Northern Ireland's sustainable development strategy will double woodland cover in 50 years. That is where the problem lies.

The contradictions within the current policy are deeply troubling. I support today's motion, and the call for a more coherent approach that values the Province's natural heritage.

3.45 pm

Other Members have spoken about our existing trees — they may also be aware that the Executive intends to bring forward new forestry legislation in spring 2009. That will be the first new forestry legislation in more than 50 years, and could give the Executive, the Departments and the relevant agencies legislative authority to deliver forestry management that is fit for the new challenges of the twenty-first century. Today's debate therefore assumes great importance because it could build awareness of some of the shortcomings of current policy and legislation, before any new legislation is brought before the Assembly.

Does the Minister recognise that the doubling of woodland cover can be used to mitigate the effects of global warming? I am sure my colleague Jim Wells will speak on that issue. If the Minister recognises that — which I believe she does — will she accept that extra effort is therefore required? Additional payments should be made to landowners who wish to plant new, native, broadleaved woodland adjacent to existing ancient and long-established woods, as other Members have mentioned. People must be encouraged to plant and care for trees on their land — and they must have an incentive to do so.

Mr Easton: Does my colleague agree that any new forests that are planted should consist entirely of the deciduous, native types of trees that currently grow in Northern Ireland? Does he also agree that councils, as well as private landowners and farmers, should be included in the process of encouraging the growth of forests across Northern Ireland?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention; his comments are well made, and I wholeheartedly support them. There is a role for councils to play in that process, alongside the landowners and farmers.

I am privileged to live in the Ards Peninsula, which is an area of matchless beauty, as many Members will agree. Having read correspondence from the Woodland Trust, BASC and Countryside Alliance, I, along with my father, planted some 2,500 to 3,000, broadleaved trees on our own farm. That was all part of the effort to address the carbon footprint. Other developers in that area have done likewise, such as at Carrowdore Primary School, where the developer, Paul O'Prey, very kindly did the same thing. Many sectors can work alongside

one another, and it is important that they do so. Not for nothing are trees called the lungs of the world. More trees create a better natural habitat, particularly for small songbirds.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to grasp the issues and ensure that the new legislation stresses the need to plant more trees, and to make sure those are broadleaved trees — not the conifer or leylandii types, which grow quickly, but do not produce the same valuable habitat. I urge the Minister to combine and co-ordinate the numerous sectors that are involved, and to bring Northern Ireland to the standard that we should reach.

Mr Wells: I believe in climate change, and that the vast majority of it has been caused by man — let me make that very clear. I also believe that the planting of trees can bring enormous benefits in reducing the impact of climate change, because trees are one way of removing carbon from the atmosphere. We as a society cannot lecture the indigenous people of the Brazilian rainforest or the Congo about their destruction of woodlands if we do not protect what we have, and restore what we have lost — and we have lost so much.

Someone asked me the other day whether there are tree-felling licences in Northern Ireland — I said that there are; they are called chainsaws. There is no protection whatsoever for our native trees in Northern Ireland — if it is not the subject of a tree preservation order, or situated in an area of special scientific interest (ASSI), woodland has absolutely no protection whatsoever. The mad axe man can strike, and woodland can be removed, and society is much the poorer for it. Steps must therefore be taken to protect what we have in the Province.

I was present at the launch at Belfast Castle of the Woodland Trust's inventory of ancient and long-standing woodlands in Northern Ireland. The very least we should do is to protect every square inch of that woodland. That can be done through ASSI designation; through the cross-compliance regulations of the single farm payments scheme, as implemented by the Department of Agriculture; or through tree preservation orders. It is absolutely essential that the small fragment of ancient woodland that still exists — which is tiny in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe — be given immediate protection.

We cannot afford to lose any more of our woodland, much of which has been so needlessly destroyed through development, agricultural intensification and neglect over the past 200 years. Some of those trees were standing when King Billy came to the Boyne — he might have tied his horse to some of them. Therefore, the trees must be protected at all costs.

I applaud the fact that all Members who spoke expressed more or less the same views. I got involved in the debate because the proposed changes to the Forestry

Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 provide a wonderful opportunity to get the legislation right. The Assembly will be involved more or less from the beginning of that process, and we have an opportunity to make certain that the law in Northern Ireland on the protection and promotion of woodlands is the best anywhere in western Europe. Therefore, I will listen with interest to the Minister. I am sure that she will give us a sneak preview of what is coming.

One aspect of tree protection that cannot be covered by changes to the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 is the vexed subject of tree preservation orders (TPO). I could write a book about tree preservation orders in South Down; they are among our most abused legislation. The Planning Service, which is the implementing authority for tree preservation orders, must, under TPO, immediately designate and give protection to all outstanding woodlands, not only those that are under threat of being felled.

When making an appeal to planners to designate an area under TPO, I find it frustrating, particularly in places such as Newcastle, to be told that there is no immediate threat. In such cases, all the locals know that the land is for sale and that a developer is waiting to pounce. Inevitably, the residents are ignored and it is only when the chainsaws move in that the planners start to act. That cannot be allowed to happen; we must identify all our important woodlands and protect them immediately.

When someone does step out of line and chop down important scenic woodland in an urban or a rural area, the full rigour of the law must be brought to bear on them. The courts can impose a fine of £30,000 for each tree if someone transgresses. To date, fines of only £200 or £500 have been imposed, which are no deterrent to a developer, given that land in Newcastle was, at one stage, selling at £1.25 million an acre. A fine of £200 for tearing down trees will not deter anyone.

Even more important, a clear signal must be sent out to developers that they will not be allowed to benefit one inch by their abuse and destruction of the tree cover. A developer who clears a five-acre patch of ground by chopping down trees should not be allowed to develop that land. That would send a clear signal to rogue developers that they cannot do that. Last Easter, a developer did exactly that at Myrtle Lodge in Newcastle, and he must never be allowed to benefit from his vandalism.

Mr Savage: I support the motion. In 2006, the Forest Service of Northern Ireland, a subsidiary body of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, produced a strategy for sustainability and growth. Although it was produced under direct rule, the document committed the Department and the Forest Service to a policy of forestation, and it suggested that

the rate of growth at that time of 500 hectares per annum was insufficient and that, at that rate, it would take a century of growth simply to achieve parity with forestation in Britain.

However, the report suggested that funds would not be available for an increase in afforestation projects until a review of the rural development regulations was completed in 2013, although some modest increases might be made through the single farm payment scheme. Despite that, the Forest Service's report for the financial year of 2006-07 included an afforestation target of only 500 hectares per annum. That target was set to increase to only 550 hectares in the following year. That rate of growth means that DARD is on course to fulfil its targets in the Programme for Government to increase the area of forest and woodland by 1,650 hectares by 2011.

In late September 2008, the charity Woodland Trust published 'A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland', which, among other concerns for woodland and forests in Northern Ireland, recommended the original target that was set by the 2006 forestry strategy of doubling the level of woodland coverage over 50 years.

According to the Woodland Trust's report, that would mean the planting of 1,740 hectares of new woodland a year. If that were to continue at the current rate, the level of woodland covered in the next 50 years would be only one third higher than it is now, and it would take a further century to achieve the targets set out in the forestry strategy. It is clear that there is an inconsistency between the woodland creation target set in the Programme for Government and that held in Forest Service's 'Northern Ireland Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth', which was published in 2006.

The Woodland Trust has asked the Executive and their agencies to deliver on their promise to double woodland cover in the next 50 years. That is a long time. The contradictions that exist in the current policy concern me. I want to know how that issue will be addressed. A single approach, which all agencies understand, is needed. In the end, that will achieve the desired target.

Now is the most appropriate time for discussion and debate on the issue, because the Executive intend to introduce new forestry legislation in spring 2009. Bearing that in mind, I ask those who are involved in the framing of that legislation to take note of the debate and its outcome.

In conclusion, I reiterate the point that other Members and I made about the limited target set in the Programme for Government for increasing the area of forest and woodland. I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that are in place to achieve the 2006 forestry strategy targets of doubling woodland cover in the next 50 years.

At present, a big issue faces those of us in the farming industry. The prices offered to farmers for their produce are anything but healthy. I ask the Minister, and all those concerned in the industry, do we produce food or wood? Those are serious thoughts. We need food to feed people, but we need wood for other things. The Department and the Committee must address those questions.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Ken Robinson, Tom Elliott, and Billy Armstrong for tabling the motion, which raises the important issue of increasing woodland areas. That is one of the Government's policy aims for forests, and it is an issue that deserves open debate. In response to George Savage's comments, my Department will examine the debate to assess whether to include in the forestry strategy any issues that were raised today. If I do not cover any issues because of time limitations, I am happy to respond to Members in writing.

I recognise Members' concerns, and I welcome their support for increasing forest areas to allow people to benefit from the wide range of opportunities that forests can provide. During the past year, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of forests and Balcas, a major wood-processing company in my constituency, which Tom Elliott mentioned.

I was impressed by how woodlands are managed, in order to provide a wide range of benefits. Those include the large scale production of timber for use in wood processing, which generates a growing and vibrant industry that generates jobs and wealth in the rural economy; forest parks and recreation areas, where people can relax and enjoy the forest setting and learn about the natural environment; the conservation and enhancement of our remaining semi-natural woodland; the provision of favourable habitat for species such as the red squirrel, and for birds of prey such as the merlin and the hen harrier, which live in new plantations; and the capacity of woodland to help to offset carbon emissions and assist in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Willie Clarke mentioned the potential of tourism. Forest Service welcomes opportunities for its forests to contribute to the development of mountain biking. Although it is not directly responsible for the sport, it is very willing to engage with representatives. Forest Service is already engaged with several stakeholder groups to implement development.

I have been very impressed by the technology, innovation and investment employed to grow and manage woodland, which eventually produces mature trees for the timber market. Those, in turn, can be converted into a variety of useful wood products. The success of that development is the result of a long-term commitment of Government to the forest sector, and

close co-operation between Government and the wood-processing industry in recent years.

4.00 pm

In encouraging the development of forests, and in co-operation with a wide variety of organisations and individuals, I am aware of the growing role that our forests play in providing recreational opportunities and in the conservation of important natural habitats. Other agencies in my Department have done quite a bit of work on this subject, both at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, (AFBI). Last week, AFBI held a very successful conference on the food v fuel debate, and the potential for renewable energy sources from woodland.

Before addressing the issue of the woodland targets set in the Programme for Government, I will outline the background to our aim of doubling the area of woodland over the next 50 years, as stated in the forest strategy, 'A Strategy for the Sustainability of Growth'. The Department's responsibilities for forestry are discharged under the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953. The emphasis of that Act and its predecessor was to encourage the formation of new forests. In 1940, there were 18,500 hectares of woodland; by 1959, that figure had risen to just under 30,000 hectares; by 1970, there were 52,000 hectares of woodland, and by 2007, there were just under 87,000 hectares of woodland covering 6.4% of land area. The increase in forest cover was largely achieved by public-sector afforestation, with conifers, peat boglands and wet mineral soils in the uplands, as was required within the Act. The aim was to provide an adequate reserve of growing trees against a period of national emergency.

Tom Elliott queried the adequacy of departmental inventories. We maintain an accurate and detailed inventory of woodland managed by the Department, and it is updated on an annual basis. Currently, that covers approximately 70% of forest area in the North. We recognise that there are some limitations in the current approach but will consider using other available data and information to allow us to fully capture details on a more long-term basis.

The Forest Service also acquired the demesne land of several estates containing areas of older, mixed woodland, which provided a valuable element of diversity of tree-type and landscape. The Act also allowed the Department to devote some of its resources to developing forest parks and recreation areas, and to set aside grounds for conservation purposes.

The general emphasis of Government policy has changed over time from treating forests as a strategic resource to an economic resource. That change in approach also coincided with greatly improved farming conditions. Land then became too expensive

for state afforestation, and the rate of forest expansion declined. In the 1970s, for example, the average cost to the Forest Service of acquiring land was between £50 and £260 per hectare. In the 1980s, that figure rose to between £500 and £1,200 per hectare; in the 1990s, it reached between £950 and £3,200 per hectare. Prices per hectare so far this decade have reached between £3,800 and £4,900. As Members can see, the rising cost of land has made it more difficult to justify its acquisition for forestry investment.

In more recent years, very high land costs have made land acquisition almost prohibitively expensive. In addition to that, in the early 1990s, the Government became committed to playing their part in conserving biodiversity. Policy was developed to prevent further afforestation of boglands, which were recognised as a threatened habitat on a global scale. Since 1987, greater emphasis has been placed on securing increased participation from private landowners. That has been achieved by providing them with direct grant-aid under the woodland grant scheme, and additional annual payments under the farm woodland scheme and its successors. Between 1987 and 2008, just under 12,400 hectares of private woodland has been established, mostly on mineral soils and at an average rate of 590 hectares per year.

Commercial development of public forests was encouraged by creating the conditions for private industry to become responsible for most of the timber harvesting. As a forest matured, and as increased volumes of timber became available for industrial use, innovative approaches to timber-marketing gave the industry the confidence to invest in new sawmills and to find sustainable markets for home-grown timber. That increased the value-added contribution that forestry makes to our economy. It doubled the area of privately owned woodland, and by the increased use of broad-leaved species, introduced a valuable element of diversity to our landscape.

As I said, forest now covers 6.4% of land area. I recognise that that is much lower than the 10% in the rest of Ireland, 12% in Britain and 33% in Europe, which is a point that many Members raised in the debate.

Against that backdrop, Forest Service carried out an extensive policy review based on the following key issues: how to obtain the best value from the Forest Service estate; the need to secure a balance of public benefits from forests through environmental improvement, public access and timber production; and the continuing scarcity of forest in the North compared with other countries.

In March 2006, the future direction of forest policy was published, and it reflected the responses of the many organisations and individuals who responded to the consultation paper on the Forest Service review.

The conclusions reached were stated as the vision and aims for forestry, and the vision was:

“To meet the forest needs of present and future generation thorough improved sustainability of forests and an increased rate of afforestation.”

The aims included:

“Provide those owning land with the information and the means to consider afforestation as a realistic alternative land use ... Encourage forest growth to provide timber, biodiversity and access opportunities”.

That vision has many similarities to the strategic plan for forestry in the South, which seeks to maximise the contribution of forestry to national socio-economic well-being on a sustainable basis that is compatible with protection of the environment.

David Ford raised several points about encouraging biodiversity, and our aims seek to protect and enhance the environment. The forest standard, under which we operate, requires us to deliver a programme of habitat restoration, conservation and environmental enhancement, and social engagement, as well as ensuring economic viability. For example, Forest Service accepts the principle of restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites and has recently developed a strategy for the management of Forest Service woodland identified on the ancient woodland inventory.

We have sought to encourage the establishment of new native woodland through a publication of the booklet, ‘Native Woodland Definitions and Guidance’, earlier this year. We also engage with a wide range of organisations in relation to forestry and the emerging issues of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. We have worked with the processing industry to develop renewable-energy opportunities from forests, and we will continue with that work.

The forestry strategy also referred to a programme of afforestation, and the strategy indicates a desire to:

“see the area of forests double so that the people ... will have access to the same level of forestry benefits as are available in”

Britain.

“While it is desirable that this should take place quickly, in practice progress depends on the willingness of landowners to plant their land and may well only be achieved over the next 50 years or so.”

The strategy states that a wide range of woodland will be encouraged, including:

“traditional coniferous and broadleaved plantations as well as new energy plantations”;

That expansion will be primarily through the conversion of private agricultural land to forest using funds made available under the rural development programme; that:

“the rate of afforestation is likely to parallel the rate of change in the agricultural sector”;

which in turn will be influenced by common agricultural policy reform and agricultural economics, which will be influenced by the state of the economy as a whole; and that the commitment of farmers to continue farming:

“means that forests are likely to expand slowly.”

However, the strategy adds that as confidence about the impact of common agricultural policy reform materialises and the advantages of growing woodland become more apparent, the demand for afforestation schemes is expected to increase.

The public service agreement (PSA) target for new afforestation over a three-year period, ending in March 2008, was 1,500 hectares, at an annual rate of 500 hectares. The total area planted in that period was 1,693 hectares. Therefore, the current PSA target has been increased to 1,650 hectares of new woodland over a three-year period ending in March 2011, at a rate of 550 hectares per year. That is a challenging target to achieve in the current economic climate, and it is acknowledged that the rate of planting will need to increase threefold to achieve the long-term aim of doubling the forest area in the next 50 years. However, our strategy anticipated a slow beginning, and my Department will renew its activity to encourage woodland expansion.

The Department will continue to offer capital grants and annual payments to encourage farmers and landowners to consider forestry as an alternative land use and to enhance existing woodland under the rural development programme for 2007-2013. Under the programme, funding is available for forestry measures of up to £16 million over the programme period. Grants are available for the establishment of both conventional woodland and short rotation coppice plantation for an energy end use.

In addition, some landowners and farmers will be eligible for the farm woodland premium scheme, comprising annual payments for up to 15 years, in order to compensate for agriculture income foregone.

Tom Elliott questioned the level of support in the North compared with that in the South. P J Bradley also raised that point. The principal difference between the schemes in the North and those in the South relates to programme funding. In the North, forestry schemes are funded through the rural development programme, but in the South, forestry grants are funded wholly through the Irish Exchequer. That means that the South's payment rates are not restricted by the same maximum allowable rates to which those in the North are bound under the rural development regulation. For example, in the South, aid of up to 100% is available for the establishment of forests, compared with our maximum of 70% under the rural development programme. In its review of opportunities to promote

grant-aided woodland expansion, the Department will note the range of support that is available in the South.

The Department will improve the publicity and marketing of the forestry grant schemes through its recently produced publicity and marketing strategy, which aims to maximise the awareness of farmers, landowners, advisory and educational bodies and their understanding of the schemes. That will be achieved through the provision of case studies, information leaflets, press articles and open days that demonstrate the benefits of woodland ownership and that will be an opportunity for interested landowners to discuss their proposals with staff from the Department's Forest Service.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Sorry, I do not have time.

Forest Service will also update its indicative map — which is published on the Department's website — that indicates where new woodland planting could make the best long-term use of land and those areas where, for environmental reasons, there may be a presumption against new woodland planting. The document will continue to be developed to target new woodland planting where it will be most environmentally and socially valuable.

Finally, Forest Service will review opportunities to promote grant-aided woodland expansion during the current business year. Its focus will be to identify the main barriers that affect woodland expansion on farmland, as well as ways that those can be overcome.

Other issues were raised during the debate; for example, P J Bradley expressed concerns about compulsory purchasing powers. Obviously, the Department's proposal is that new powers will be used sparingly and proportionately and will comply with normal compulsory purchase procedures and controls.

Mr Wells raised several points. Although I found his contribution interesting, many of his comments need to be addressed to his party colleague the Environment Minister. In response to a point that he made about forestry, I hope that the forestry Bill will contain provisions to regulate the felling and regeneration of woodlands by means of a licence. Formal detailed instructions will be issued on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister must draw her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will.

Government's long-term commitment to forestry has generated 950 rural jobs, and, annually, it provides £24 million of value added to the economy through primary-wood processing. In addition, forests attract around two million day visitors annually. About one

fifth of Forest Service woodland is designated for statutory conservation purposes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Minister. You have done well.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: OK. My Department will respond to any points that I have missed.

Mr McCallister: I join other colleagues in welcoming the Minister back to the Assembly. I thought that the Minister for Regional Development would respond to the debate. He is in charge of roads, an area in which work is done within the same timescale — at least a century is needed for anything to be done.

In his opening remarks, my colleague Mr Elliott discussed at length the importance of woodland and the need to increase its density in order to achieve health benefits for people. Other Members made that point when they referred to recreational use of forests and the importance of those areas for the whole of Northern Ireland: environmentally; as a habitat for wildlife; and, indeed, to help to protect the planet — and not just from Sammy Wilson.

Of course, Mr Elliott made the important point that it is not only improbable, but impossible, to achieve targets at the current rate of progress. The Assembly must do much better and raise its game; otherwise, it will not come close to achieving those targets. Mr Elliott also spoke encouragingly about the scheme because of the difference that it makes to the economy.

He and the Minister represent the same constituency, and Mr Elliott mentioned a company there that makes an important contribution to an area that does not always attract other jobs. It is important for the Assembly to help such companies to provide employment and to maintain recreational areas.

4.15 pm

Mr Irwin of the DUP talked about the Programme for Government, grant-aided schemes, how best to improve woodland cover, and renewable energy.

Mr Clarke from Sinn Féin referred several times to how the Executive should do this, that and the other. Unless I am mistaken, the Executive have not met for a while, and, therefore, they are unlikely to do much at the moment. The Assembly must get a grip on that problem; the Executive must get back to work. They must take their rightful place and show leadership not only on this issue but on a vast range of other matters. Mr Clarke mentioned South Down, where people are fortunate to have some high-quality forests, particularly for recreational purposes. Mr Clarke and Mr Elliott mentioned that forest parks are hugely beneficial to physical and mental health, and it is important to recognise them as great assets.

By virtue of P J Bradley's contribution, the debate covered a period from 400 years in the past to 100 years in the future. He managed to include information on why so many forests were cleared 400 years ago — it was good of him to mention that. He went on to talk about the rural development programme and questioned the different payments received by full-time and part-time farmers. Although I did not hear the Minister respond to Mr Bradley's question, I am sure that when she and her officials read the Hansard report, they will pick that up.

Mr Ford of the Alliance Party talked about the challenging nature of the proposals. As he outlined the targets, he made some useful points about how ancient woodlands must be looked after and protected. He referred to the failure of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, although the Minister is probably not at liberty to talk about that Department.

Mr Shannon talked about the benefits of woodland to wildlife, although presumably he was referring to the wildlife that he has not shot out of the sky — I was surprised that he used the word "target". He made serious points about the recreational and sporting benefits of forestry throughout the world, and he also mentioned the contribution that sport makes to the economy.

Mr Wells, as the Minister pointed out, disagreed with his party colleague the Minister of the Environment when he announced that he believes in climate change.

Mr Beggs: He has come out.

Mr McCallister: Is he allowed to use that phrase?

Mr Wells's position sets him at odds with the Minister of the Environment. However, he spoke passionately not only about the environmental impact but about how to protect forestry. He suggested using some of the existing mechanisms, such as ASSIs, part of the single farm payment or tree protection orders. He also raised the issue of rogue developers not being allowed to use land that has been cleared.

One drawback of holding the debate at the same time as a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is that my party colleagues Mr Savage and Mr Elliott, having made their contributions, had to return to that meeting.

Mr Savage talked about the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953, and I am disappointed that the Minister did not give more details as to what any amendment to that Act would entail.

Mr Wells: I had hoped that the Minister would have taken the opportunity to indicate the nature of the new legislation, which will form the bedrock of a strategy to protect our woodlands. I am, therefore, taking this opportunity to express my slight concern that she did not do so.

Mr McCallister: I agree with Mr Wells; such information would have been useful.

Thankfully, the Minister did not delve as far into the past as P J Bradley; had she done so, her 15 minutes would have been insufficient. However, she gave the House a fair old history lesson, outlining how we have reached this stage. She mentioned the 1940s and 1950s, which were times of national emergency, and she detailed private landowners' increased participation in 1987. Although that information was interesting, I, like other Members, wanted to hear about the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision for making a difference and for achieving the Programme for Government's targets. The policy of printing and distributing leaflets in the hope of arousing interest seems like wishful thinking.

The Minister said that forestry schemes in Northern Ireland are funded through the rural development programme, whereas those in the Republic of Ireland are funded directly by the Irish Exchequer. I would have liked the Minister to have said whether she will propose policy changes at Executive meetings — if those meetings recommence — or whether she will seek funding. I would like to know the direction in which the Department sees such policies going. Will the rural development programme be enough to enable targets to be achieved? The House requires information about the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision and about how it intends to achieve targets rather than wishful thinking lacking in firm substance. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the limited target set in the Programme for Government for increasing the area of forest and woodland; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the strategies that are in place to achieve the 2006 Forestry Strategy target of doubling woodland cover in the next fifty years.

Adjourned at 4.23 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

16 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
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Donald Armstrong	}	Department of the Environment
Mr John Brogan		
Mrs Gillian McIntyre		

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): The Committee has concluded its evidence sessions on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill and will soon begin its clause-by-clause scrutiny.

Witnesses appearing before the Committee today are Donald Armstrong, head of the driver, vehicle and operator policy branch, and John Brogan and Gillian McIntyre, both of whom are members of the Department of the Environment's (DOE) Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill team. They are very welcome again.

Mr Donald Armstrong (Department of the Environment): Thank you for your welcome. I am sure that you have noticed that we have aged quite a bit over the past few months.

The Chairperson: Have you? Not a bit of it.

Mr D Armstrong: It feels that way.

I will give a brief overview on which we will take questions. Our departmental Assembly liaison officer,

Una Downey, has provided the Committee with the Department's response to its query about the particular regulation-raising clauses in the Bill. There are quite a few such clauses, which I will summarise.

First, the Bill allows for commencement Orders to commence, repeal, amend or modify the Bill — once enacted — through affirmative resolution as contained in clause 56. Secondly, one regulation will be made under affirmative resolution. For example, clause 27(3) deals with the period between reviews. That has been set in the Bill at five years, but there is provision to change that by affirmative resolution.

All the other regulations in the clauses are subject to negative resolution and are subject to consultation as set out in clause 57(11). They would also be subject to SL1 proposals being brought to the Committee.

In general, the regulation-making powers correspond with those that have been created by the GB Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995, of which members have a copy. Those powers are also in the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, and they generally replicate what is already in place in other legislation.

However, there are some cases in which, following recommendations from GB and the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) when the Bill was being drafted, we have moved powers from primary into subordinate legislation. I will give the Committee one example of that.

The particulars that a person must supply when they apply for a licence are listed in section 8 of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995. Details that pertain to the information that must be supplied under section 8 are contained in schedule 2 of that Act. We have replicated section 8 of the GB Act in clause 7 of our Bill. However, we have moved the detail from the schedule into regulations. That is a slight change. The reason for that is that it makes it easier to update and amend legislation as appropriate. That approach has been adopted with OLC agreement, and it relates generally to the administration of the licensing process and function.

When the former Minister gave approval for the Bill, three options were considered. The first was to do nothing and to leave Northern Ireland's system as it is. The second was to replicate exactly what happens in GB. The third — the one that the Minister chose and with which we have proceeded — is to replicate what happens in GB but to allow for local variations because of differences that occur in Northern Ireland due to its rural environment, and the number of small businesses and so on.

That approach is facilitated by the fact that the Bill contains regulation-making powers. During the two years after the Bill has been enacted, the Department

will be able to take on board representations, such as those that we have already heard — on exemptions, operating centres, and so on — when it makes regulations. Therefore, the Department's response to the industry is that, through those regulations, it will have greater freedom to tailor the final outcome into something that pleases and helps everybody, rather than having to stick to something rigid.

Much of the work on goods-vehicle licensing — and on public-transport licensing, for that matter — is set out in EU directives. In order to transpose those directives into Northern Ireland law, legislation must be changed. There are severe difficulties in processing and timing in achieving transposition dates. EU directives are much easier to transpose if regulations exist already. I accept that there are many regulation-making clauses in the Bill that will provide the flexibility that is needed to respond to the industry and to the directives, and they will, hopefully, create a Bill that is easier to work with and is as up to date as possible.

The Chairperson: Do members have any queries on that aspect of the process? Do you want to ask a question, Trevor?

Mr T Clarke: I will wait until the next Stage to say no to the Bill.

The Chairperson: I have several questions and points on which I would like clarification. Clause 20 sets out the conditions for the issue of licences. Is there any particular reason why those conditions are so broad? Clause 20(1)(d) uses the words:

“for any other prescribed purpose.”

Mrs Gillian McIntyre (Department of the Environment): There are specific occasions when conditions can be attached, for example, to improve road safety or to ensure that every operation when a vehicle leaves an operating centre and joins a public road is safe, and when there are environmental issues or declarations of convictions. The Department wants to include that generality in order to enable it to respond to the wide range of industries that exist and the situations that can occur. The aim of operator licensing is to try to bring as many people as possible into the regime, and the Department intends to achieve that by attaching conditions for certain circumstances, for example, for general road-safety purposes. It also enables conditions to be attached for small operators that differ from those that are attached for larger operators.

The Chairperson: Am I right in saying that any additions or amendments to the legislation would be subject to negative resolution?

Mr John Brogan (Department of the Environment): Those are subject to negative resolution at the moment; as Donald said, most of the regulations will be subject to negative resolution.

The Chairperson: Is there any other way of doing it?

Mr D Armstrong: Affirmative resolution could be used. However, that process is much slower and would tie up the Assembly for what is a relatively administrative piece of work. Nevertheless, I would be happy if the Committee wished to make some of the regulations subject to affirmative resolution.

Mr Beggs: I assume that there would be a relatively short delay only in changing from negative resolution to affirmative resolution. Would that, therefore, not be a more appropriate method of dealing with the situation, in case some unforeseen difficulties arise with negative resolution, given that such wide powers would exist under the primary legislation?

Mr Brogan: Across Departments, the convention is that most regulations are subject to negative resolution. However, there are occasions when regulations must be subject to affirmative resolution; for example, regulations under clause 27(3) may be made by affirmative resolution. The Office of the Legislative Counsel advised that any regulations that are made under clause 27(3) will be subject to affirmative resolution because they will amend existing primary legislation by substituting five years with three years, six years, or whatever.

It has been the convention to leave other regulations to negative resolution. However, the Department is easy about it, and if the Committee is anxious about clause 20(1)(d), by all means the subordinate legislation that it, or any other clause can make, can be passed by affirmative resolution.

The Chairperson: I have a query about clause 57(8), where a contravention of a provision is declared to be an offence. Will you clarify why the Department needs — or feels that it needs — those additional offences? How would the Department exercise that power?

Mr D Armstrong: Clause 57(8) refers to the level of fine.

The Chairperson: It refers to the contravention of the provision of regulations.

Mr Brogan: That will apply only to those regulations that list an offence. It is in the Bill that the punishment or penalty for that offence would, in this case, be on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 3. It is a case of setting the actual offence and the penalty in primary legislation. It makes it consistent throughout the Bill that all penalties for offences are contained on the face of the Bill. However, the description of that offence may be contained in the regulation.

The Chairperson: Would it not be appropriate to make that subject to affirmative resolution?

Mr Brogan: Generally, the OLC looks towards negative resolution to ensure that the Assembly is not clogged up with —

The Chairperson: I am sorry, what is the OLC?

Mr Brogan: The OLC is the Office of the Legislative Counsel — the agency that drafted the Bill. I wish that I could draft the Bill, but no, such work is left to the Office of the Legislative Counsel. That body comprises barristers, so we rely heavily on its legal advice. We do not ask for certain conditions; we rely on the advice of the OLC, and such reliance ensures that there is consistency across Departments.

Mr D Armstrong: Clause 57(8) is not, in itself, a regulation-making power: it is a statement of an offence. It would not be subject to resolution.

The Chairperson: Would it not?

Mr D Armstrong: No; clause 57(8) is a statement that there is an offence under the regulations resulting in a fine not exceeding level 3. It is not a regulation-making power in itself.

Mr Beggs: What is level 3?

Mr Brogan: Level 3 is a fine up to £1,000.

Mr Ford: The point is that clause 57(8) creates criminal offences on the back of regulations that may themselves only be subject to negative resolution, rather than offences being created on the face of the Bill. That is where the issue of an affirmative resolution is more significant.

Mr D Armstrong: I understand that. Are you suggesting that all the regulations be subject to affirmative resolution? If so, that would create a business issue.

Mr Ford: No. Clause 20(1)(d) allows the Department to attach conditions to a licence:

“for any other prescribed purpose”.

However, when that is read in conjunction with clause 57(8), it seems to be a fairly open-ended deal for the Department. If criminal offences are then created on the back of those regulations, the legislature should do something about it.

Mr D Armstrong: Are you suggesting that clause 57(8) reinforces the case for the regulations under clause 20(1)(d) to be subject to affirmative resolution? There are other regulating powers in the Bill that are not as open.

Mr Ford: I am not suggesting that anything in the regulations that is clearly spelled out in the Bill and the schedules should be subject to affirmative resolution. However, where things are open ended, we have to guard our end of the process, regardless of what OLC tells the Department.

The Chairperson: The Committee will communicate its views directly with the Department on broad points and await its response. We can then deliberate on them.

Mr D Armstrong: I accept that there are some broad issues to be considered.

The Chairperson: OK, the Committee can communicate its views with the Department instead of going through them today.

Mr Boylan: I have some questions about the operating centres, which is an issue on which Donald loves to answer questions. From a road-safety perspective, one would not want an operator to reverse his or her vehicle out of a driveway. What does the legislation say about that? I will not ask about the planning issue; that is a separate matter.

Mr D Armstrong: Are you asking for the definition of an operating centre?

Mr Boylan: Yes, and about how to overcome the issue of driving into and out of an operating centre that is someone's home.

Mr D Armstrong: The legislation requires that an operating centre is listed on an operator's licence. By definition, the operating centre is the place where a vehicle is normally kept when it is not in use. To be fair, the term “operating centre” is a slight misnomer, because it implies that it is a centre from which people are operating. Instead, it refers to the place where vehicles are stored or kept when they are not in use. That could refer to a quarry, for example, which is an operating centre in the literal sense of the term, but it could also refer to — as Mr Boylan suggested — the side of a house where someone parks their vehicle at night.

There is no proposal in the legislation to specify the standard of an operating centre — that will be at the discretion of the person who makes the decisions. In GB for example, one of the Traffic Commissioners, Mrs Beverly Bell, who gave evidence to the Committee last week, spoke of a guideline where a vehicle must enter and exit an operating centre in forward gear — that is not in either primary or subordinate legislation, but it is a guideline that would be applied in a discretionary manner. For example, it may be easy to drive a 4-ton transit van in and out of an operating centre in forward gear or to reverse it out, but a 40-ton or a 44-ton vehicle is a completely different proposition. Therefore, discretion is exercised, but there will be no specification in legislation stating, for example, that someone must enter and exit an operating centre in forward gear.

Mr Boylan: I am trying to get a definition of what type of vehicle is over the 3.5-ton limit. Perhaps the Department could provide some information on what types of vehicles are over the limit, for example, a Luton van. I ask that because the issue will affect 75%

of the industry, who are all own-account operators, which is a substantial number.

Mr D Armstrong: Would it be helpful if we provided the Committee with photographs of vehicles that are in ruled in and out of scope because of their weight?

The Chairperson: Yes, that would be useful. How can we get around the misnomer of the term “operating centre”? The term “operate” is a derivative of the verb “to work”. The problems with the Planning Service and other difficulties are created by that misnomer.

Mr D Armstrong: The operating centres of the majority of businesses will be the place from which they operate and carry out their loading and unloading. Haulage companies and big companies, such as the Henderson Group, will operate from such a centre. “Operating centre” becomes a misnomer when an individual drives a vehicle home and parks it at the side of his or her house at night. In such cases, the house is not an operating centre, because there is no storage at home, and that may have planning implications. The home is merely a place where they park their vehicle, and that is when the misnomer begins to have an effect.

That is why we have provided a definition, so far as the Bill is concerned. If the Committee wants to think of another way of describing the place where a vehicle is kept when it is not in use, we will consider that. Thus far, we have been comfortable with the term “operating centre”, which is also used for the hire-for-reward sector.

The Chairperson: Perhaps you could come up with a few ideas from the thesaurus.

Mr Boylan: I do not know whether a clearer definition or an alternative to “operating centre” is required.

Mr D Armstrong: Do you want a clearer definition or a different title?

Mr Boylan: Perhaps a different terminology is required.

Mr T Clarke: I did not intend to comment on this today, because the Committee knows my view on the issue, and it has not changed, and nor will it. One of your earlier submissions to the Committee stated that you would review what you deemed as a suitable operating centre, and you referred to such a review. It was suggested that if someone made a complaint about an environmental issue, for instance, a review would be instigated sooner. I am concerned about that and about what it will mean for someone who parks their 3.5-ton vehicle at the side of their home.

Mr D Armstrong: That is a difficulty, and it was highlighted by the presentation that was made last

week by one of the Traffic Commissioners. It is safer to park a 3-6-ton vehicle at the side of a house than it is to park a 40-ton vehicle. Those are two different situations. That is a huge range of vehicles for which to tie down into legislation. That is why it is left to the discretion of the Traffic Commissioners in GB and why we feel that discretionary powers are necessary.

Mr T Clarke: That leads to another good point. Are we looking at another job-creation service in Northern Ireland? Will there be another commissioner in Northern Ireland to legislate for that in the future?

Mr D Armstrong: We are not talking about legislation for that role. As the Committee has heard, there are independent traffic commissioners in GB. While preparing the proposals with the OLC, we sought to have the legislation provide the facility to provide for a traffic commissioner in Northern Ireland. That was refused to us, and, at that time, the Minister said that the issue of a traffic commissioner for Northern Ireland should be left to a different forum. We have freight, buses and taxis. The issue of an independent regulator to look over all those areas should be considered in the round, and not merely in relation to goods vehicles.

That leaves us with two options. First, we can let the existing Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), which currently regulates the hire-for-reward sector, take on board the function and leave it within the agency. Secondly, we can separate the function and have a regulator appointed in the Department, but separate from the agency, to have the same the powers and carry out the same functions of the Traffic Commissioners in GB. The Bill allows us to do that.

There are pros and cons for each option. For instance, DVA is already up and running with the system for hire or reward bolted on. The disadvantage of that is that the administration — the prosecutor, judge and jury — are all in the same organisation, and that could be viewed as being unsatisfactory and not sufficiently independent. Alternatively, the traffic commissioner role could be carried out separately, and, should the Government decide to introduce an independent traffic commissioner in the future, it would be easier to transfer that function.

We have to work through that. We have taken views from industry and considered what the best process would be, but we do not have a final solution. An independent traffic commissioner is not envisaged in the legislation, and we have not been allowed to do that.

The Chairperson: Do you want to leave that for another day, Trevor?

Mr T Clarke: Yes.

Mr Ford: I was interested by Donald’s phrase: “we have not been allowed to do that”

in relation to an independent traffic commissioner. I presume that he means that the previous Environment Minister instructed the Department not to do that.

Mr D Armstrong: The previous Minister instructed us to proceed with the legislation without including a traffic commissioner. However, when discussing the drafting of the legislation with OLC, we asked whether they would allow the legislation to provide for a traffic commissioner should any future Minister decide that one was required. The OLC was unhappy to include that provision in the legislation, and it stated that it was cleaner to keep it as it was.

The Minister decided that the traffic commissioner should be considered in the round over freight, taxis and buses. The OLC was happy to work with that decision.

Mr Ford: The Committee has made no formal decision on the evidence that Mrs Bell gave last week, but some of us were impressed by what she said. It could be argued that instituting a traffic commissioner for freight — who could subsequently assume other responsibilities — would provide a good indication of what would be the appropriate course of action to take.

Mr D Armstrong: That is a valid argument. Including the own-account sector in Northern Ireland's freight industry makes that industry significantly bigger than was initially envisaged. Indeed, the freight industry could become even bigger, depending on the number of exemptions that are granted. It could also be argued strongly that the freight industry in Northern Ireland is of a sufficient size to warrant a traffic commissioner. Scotland has a traffic commissioner, and the freight industry in Northern Ireland is bigger than that in Scotland. Your argument is valid, but that provision is not contained in this legislation.

Mr Ford: I presume that that provision would not be beyond the Long Title of the Bill, because it concerns the licensing of operators. I assume that if the Committee were minded to propose amendments, and the Assembly accepted them, they would be competent.

Mr Brogan: We enquired about that possibility, but we were advised by the Office of the Legislative Counsel that the constitution of traffic commissioner would warrant completely separate legislation.

Mr Ford: With respect, I am not asking for your advice about what is convenient for the OLC and the Department. We need to establish the ambit of the Bill as it currently stands.

Mr D Armstrong: All the powers of the GB Traffic Commissioners are replicated exactly in the Bill. The discussion now is about where those powers should be exercised: in the agency; separate from the agency but within the Department; or outside the Department. The Bill provides the opportunity to adopt either of the first two approaches, but not the third.

Mr Ford: It is the Bill as it currently stands that does not make provision for the third approach.

Mr D Armstrong: That is correct.

Mr Weir: You have received advice about the approach that should be adopted, but you have not been advised that it would be legally impossible to make provision for the implementation of a traffic commissioner for freight, for example. Is that a fair comment?

Mr D Armstrong: Yes.

Mr Weir: As Mr Ford and Mr Clarke said, the Committee may suggest amendments to the Bill to allow for a traffic commissioner. You have not been advised that that could not be done. You have merely been advised that that would be legally incompetent and that separate legislation would be necessary if there is to be a traffic regulator. You made that point in response to David Ford, but I want that to be clarified.

Mr Beggs: Why can the Bill not make that provision? I am not necessarily suggesting that it should be made now, but the Bill should provide ability for that provision to be made in secondary legislation. Has the judgement been based on the fact that the Minister is not minded to go down that route?

Mr D Armstrong: I cannot comment on whether the OLC took the Minister's view into account when advising us not to include that provision in the Bill.

Mr Beggs: In general, does the OLC take the Minister's view into account?

Mr Brogan: The judgement was made on the basis that the Bill would have to make provision for the traffic commissioner's terms of employment — that is, the hiring and firing. In GB, the traffic commissioner system is contained outside of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995. From a purely legislative point of view, it would be more appropriate for a traffic commissioner to be instituted under stand-alone primary legislation. It should not be attached to the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill, which purely concerns licensing and does not — in any shape or form — involve the powers of an individual traffic commissioner.

Mr Beggs: I understand what you say about wanting to use separate legislation to institute such a commissioner. However, would any provisions be required in the Bill to make that mesh in more easily, should that be the route that is taken?

Mr Brogan: If a decision were made to institute a traffic commissioner, it would be a simple matter of amending the Bill to allow the powers that are invested in the Department to be invested in a traffic commissioner, and he or she would take over that role. It would not be

impossible. It would be a straightforward procedure, but another Bill would be required.

Mr Beggs: Could that provision not be added now, so that the Department would not have to amend the primary legislation, should a traffic commissioner be required in the future?

Mr Brogan: We could consider that, and I will certainly seek advice on it.

Mr I McCrea: We are talking about the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. However, you are referring to buses and other types of transport. Surely a separate Bill would be needed to incorporate the other two types of transport.

Mr Beggs: My point is that where possible, we ought to avoid having to come back and initiate, or amend, primary legislation. We are spending a great deal of time discussing the matter now, and a subsequent amendment could follow a similar line. If that provision were in the Bill, it would be a matter of an amendment, which would be much easier.

Mr Brogan: The Bill has the power to create an Order and propose a draft Order that would amend the Bill. That can be done. That power is not used often, but we can seek advice as to whether it could be used in such a situation.

Mr Beggs: I look forward to hearing your advice.

The Chairperson: The Committee will write to the Department to seek agreement to having some of the powers in the Bill changed from being subject to negative resolution to being subject to affirmative resolution in accordance with the comments that have been made by the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Thank you for your time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

16 October 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
Mrs Claire McGill
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Craig Allen	} Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Dr Michael McBride	
Mr Ivan McMaster	
Mr Bernard Mitchell	

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Mr Bernard Mitchell, Mr Ivan McMaster and Mr Craig Allen from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, along with Dr Michael McBride, the Chief Medical Officer, to the Committee's continuing clause-by-clause consideration of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. They are here to explain the meaning of the clauses of the Bill, provide clarification and answer questions as required.

We will continue where we left off last week. Clause 12 establishes the regional agency for public health and social well-being. Before I invite the officials to explain the meaning of the clause, together with the corresponding schedule 2, I am conscious that we had a fairly detailed discussion about the merits of the proposed regional agency during last week's meeting. I invite the officials to outline briefly the provisions in clause 12 and the corresponding schedule 2, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Mr Ivan McMaster (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Clause 12 establishes a regional agency for public health and social well-being as a body corporate. As we discussed last week, that allows the organisation to do certain things on its own, such as regulate its own procedures and employ its own staff. Schedule 2 deals with the constitution and operation of the regional agency. Schedule 2 is almost an exact copy of schedule 1, which establishes the regional board. The one significant variation is that the regional agency's board is granted permission to include a prescribed number of local elected representatives, the numbers of which will be determined by subordinate legislation.

Mr Easton: I am not against a regional agency per se, but I am still not convinced of its merits as a stand-alone body that is separate from the proposed regional board. I see it as an extra layer of bureaucracy, the cost of which would be substantial at a time when we are expected to be making efficiency savings. I do not understand why it cannot be part of the regional board and still do just as good a job, if it is placed in the right context within the board, and if its funding is properly examined. I do not accept that it must be separate.

Will the regional agency make its decisions independently, or will it need the separate agreement of the regional board or the Department? I am confused about that. The money for the agency would be better spent if it were an internal organ of the regional board. I propose that clause 12 be subsumed into clause 6 so that there is a joint body, rather than two bodies.

Ms S Ramsey: I partly understand what Alex is saying. We must be careful not to make any decisions on that issue for the time being. I am conscious that many people who responded to the consultation see the proposals for a regional board and a regional agency as a positive way ahead. I am not saying that those people are right or wrong. When we talk about front-line services and front-line service delivery, we are talking about the organisations that provide those services.

In its submission to the Committee, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) argues that its proposed amendments to clauses 8(3) and 9(4)(1) would mean that:

"the relationship between RAPHSW on the one hand and the Regional Board and Local Commissioning Groups on the other will become one of strategic partnership rather than simply consultation and advice. This will, in turn, help to ensure that public health is firmly at the forefront of service design and delivery".

I want to tease that issue out, because if we are saying that organisations such as the RCN are the experts in certain matters, we could be going against what they and other service providers want to aspire to in the Health Service.

Dr Deeny: I have to take on board what Michael McBride said last week, namely, that if the agency is incorporated into the board, public health may well become the poor relation. My understanding — and I would like verification from the officials and the Chief Medical Officer — is that the local commissioning groups (LCGs) will have the clout to commission services locally and that an important part of their work will be to work alongside the regional agency.

Public health — and I have been in general practice for years — public education and health promotion are an important part of our future, so I would not like to think that the local commissioning groups would be working with part of a board that was treated like a poor relation.

In addition, we are concerned about bureaucracy, and if we are thinking about decreasing bureaucracy, I do not want people losing their jobs. I asked Bernard last week about staff numbers, and the figures 700, 400 and 250 were mentioned. Some people would say that 1,400 members of staff is a large number of people administering the Health Service from Belfast for a population of 1·7 million.

The answer, possibly, is to have fewer people in each of the bodies. To have 700 people in the Department seems to be a lot, when we have a population that is only the size of Yorkshire. I have come round to believing that the regional agency must be separate from the board because the local commissioning groups need to get top advice — and very important advice about public health and health promotion — from a body that is not treated as a poor relation. Will you confirm that that is the case and explain how they will work together?

Dr Michael McBride (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): That is the point that Tommy Gallagher made clearly about the locality level at last week's Committee meeting. Staff from the board and the agency will support LCGs in delivering the service needs of local communities and populations, and in addressing the challenges of health inequalities in order that everyone is equally well.

More importantly, agency staff will focus on, and work with, other partnerships in local government, local authorities, local policing and in education, because it is not services that determine whether someone is healthy, but good education, life and employment opportunities, and the communities, environment and network around people that make them feel supported and as valued members of society. That is what keeps people healthy and well: loving families and supportive communities. The Department will give emphasis and profile to public health.

For once, we will not be saying one thing about public health and doing another, because we all talk

the talk and say that it is important to address health inequalities so that everyone is equally well. However, if you ask me a question about the Department's proportionate spend vis-à-vis health services compared with dealing with health inequalities, we spend less than 1% of our budget on addressing health inequalities and improving the health of the population with upstream interventions. That is the fact of the matter.

By creating a separate agency, the Department will be saying to the public of Northern Ireland that public health is an important issue. We will also ensure that that agency is a key and equal player in negotiating leverage over the totality of the budget for the board and the agency. At that grass-roots level, you will not see the join: they will work in partnership because they have to do that.

Dr Deeny: You spoke about elected representatives on the agency. That is new to me. Will you elaborate?

Mr Bernard Mitchell (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Two elected representatives are provided for on the board of the agency.

Dr Deeny: Will they be councillors?

Mr Mitchell: They will be district councillors.

Mr McMaster: Paragraph 3(1)(f) of schedule 2 provides for: "a prescribed number of members of district councils appointed by the Department in such manner as may be prescribed."

Mrs Hanna: I support the establishment of a separate agency for public health for the very reasons that have been outlined: addressing health inequalities, early intervention and prevention. However, I have raised concerns about the agency having teeth. It must be a real partnership, bottom-up as well as top-down. That is my only concern. I understand that, in the day-to-day running, the issue of public health could get lost if it is linked into the regional board.

However, I still need to be convinced that it will have teeth and will make a difference. It must not be a talking shop: it needs to have public-health professionals on board, and they must be able to make decisions.

Mr Mitchell: We will provide a detailed framework — and I do not mean the framework document. We are doing specific work at present, following on from the Minister's advice that he wishes to give consideration to joint sign-up. We are doing detailed work on the relationship between the board and the agency to ensure that the product of their work is an integrated commissioning plan, of which both have ownership, both approve and — as I said at last week's meeting — which gives the agency not only direct input into the smaller amounts of money that it will commit but very significant influence over the £4 billion that the board spends in total. In that way, the agency can begin

to shape the pattern of expenditure, target it, and achieve the outcomes in public health and social well-being that we want.

I have no difficulty whatsoever in assuring members that a clear, solid framework will emerge that will describe exactly how the two organisations will work in an integrated way to a common agenda.

Mrs Hanna: That is fair enough. It is helpful that you have articulated that in detail.

Dr McBride: That is at the root of Alex's important appeal for absolute clarity about this — eye-watering clarity. As the discussion that we have just had illustrates, the difficulty is that such clarity is not outlined in the legislation. That is part of the challenge.

Sue asked about consultative responses: we have had an unprecedented response to this consultation exercise. From what we have heard, and from what people have told us, some 59% of all respondents support the development of a separate agency for public health; 20% were undecided —

Mr Mitchell: If I may correct you, 59% of those who discussed the issue of the agency —

Dr McBride: I am sorry: 59% of those who discussed the issue of the agency were in support of it; 20% were undecided; and another 21% of those who had discussed that issue were not supportive.

It is worth mentioning the bodies that were supportive: the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland; Royal College of Midwives UK Board for Northern Ireland; the Health Promotion Agency; the Northern Ireland Chief Environmental Health Officers Group; the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health; the Institute of Public Health in Ireland; the British Dental Association; the British Psychological Society; and the Health Protection Agency in London.

Sue referred to a submission from the RCN: it emphasised the need to put public health at the centre. It qualified its response by saying that it needed to see more detail. That is entirely appropriate. The Committee also needs more information and discussion to ensure that it has all the details.

Mr Gardiner: I support what Sue and Carmel have said, and I concur with their views. It is a little like the relationship between this Committee and the Department: we oversee what the Department and the Minister does. If we do not establish an independent agency to oversee what the board is doing, we allow the Minister and the Department to run the show as they see fit. However, we are here as elected public representatives. We are doing a good job, and I encourage and support the establishment of the agency.

Mr Buchanan: My views are well known. I do not see the need to set up another agency. I take on board

the positive aspects of setting up an agency and putting public health in the forefront, but I cannot see why that cannot be incorporated within the board. It should be one body rather than a separate agency that would need up to 400 staff to administer.

For example, across Northern Ireland, district policing partnerships and community safety partnerships were set up; they run in tandem and work is duplicated. There is no need for those two partnerships. We will be setting up a board and an agency, and there will be a duplication of work that is not required. I cannot see why the two bodies cannot be in the one board.

It was mentioned that the Committee may need more clarification to find out what the regional agency would do and what powers it would have. Perhaps the matter should be deferred. I cannot see why we need to set up another agency to run alongside the board. The work could be incorporated into one body that could do as good a job as a separate agency.

Dr McBride: The important point is that there would be no more staff. Staff numbers would remain exactly the same whether there is to be a separate agency or a unified model. The efficiency savings will be realised, and there will be no more staff in either model.

To answer the question about why there should not be a single model: we have 20 years' experience of a single model, albeit separated into four boards. We still have not seen the problems associated with health inequalities or improvements in healthcare being addressed successfully. Mr Buchanan is right to challenge our thinking on a unitary model. I do not know whether the unitary model will deliver anything different from what was delivered previously.

The Committee has met the community and voluntary sector, and it knows that, frequently, because of acute pressures and the issues about the financial balance of trusts, the projects that are working well at a local and community level are not being disseminated widely across Northern Ireland and implemented on the ground. Indeed, many of those organisations are surviving on short-term funding from year to year with end-of-year-slippage money from boards. Public health is not central and is not a major priority for boards at present. However, that is not because the boards do not want to do it; it is because they are distracted with more immediate and pressing issues, and they cannot get round to the longer term, more sustainable issue of building on a foundation of public health.

In a single organisation, the public-health agenda would disappear. The health-protection agenda, which we have not discussed, is important. Canada, post-SARS 2003, moved to establish an agency for public health for the sole reason that it recognised that a separate agency would give a higher profile to the

health-protection challenges, whether those challenges might be healthcare-associated infections or multi-drug-resistant bacteria, such as listeria or tuberculosis, which are on the increase in our communities, or whether it might be a pandemic flu outbreak. It is about building resilience and capacity into the system so that public health is strong — and that is not only about health services.

Mr Mitchell: The staff would be senior professional medical, nursing and allied health staff who currently work in the boards and have a significant input to the commissioning process. They also have a significant input into the public-health and well-being agenda.

Whether there is a unitary body or two bodies, those people's work must still be done. In a single-body model, rather than those people working for the agency, they would work for the board because their jobs must still be done. Any savings that would be made would be fairly limited and would come primarily from the positions of chairperson, chief executive and a small number of directors' posts that may be lost.

When working on the new organisations, we were careful not to replicate support services functions so that the agency would not be seen, for example, to set up its own human resources, finance and corporate services machinery. We envisage that the organisation will get those services from other parts of the system. That is why the somewhat anomalous situation exists, in which it appears that there are an additional 200 staff to run the new agency. That is not the case. If, tomorrow, there were to be no new agency, the bulk of those staff would belong to the new board because their work must still be done. Any savings would be made at the upper echelons and would not be that significant. I welcome the opportunity to explain that.

The Chairperson: I am sorry, Sue. I want to invite Tommy to ask a question.

Mr Gallagher: Will Sue get a chance to ask another question?

The Chairperson: I will bring Sue back in at the end.

Ms S Ramsey: Thank you.

Mr Gallagher: I support the idea of there being two separate bodies. I am happy that we proceed on that basis. We must decide soon whether there will be one or two organisations.

A much stronger public-health message is needed. The best way to do that is with separate authorities. The problem with the public-health message is that several authorities seem to be responsible for it; the Health Promotion Agency and the trusts all carry out health promotion and such activities. We are worse off for that as regards hammering out a strong message on

health promotion and public health. Therefore, I am happy that the two authorities be separate.

Will the situation continue in which trusts do essentially the same work? They are not mentioned in the Bill because they do not need to be. Are they empowered under the relevant legislation, the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, to carry out a certain health-promotion function? If they still have that function under legislation, that will result in duplication of functions. Perhaps someone can throw some light on that matter.

Mr Mitchell: This issue featured prominently during consultation. At its conclusion, many people cautioned against wholesale centralisation of trust staff who are currently based in local communities where they do work that is valued highly. We certainly got that message from the trusts. We also got it strongly from the community and voluntary sector, who said that we must be careful: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. They value the interaction by local trust staff. Their advice was not to pool all those functions managerially at a central point.

Our response was to limit the functions that are taken over by the new agency — those that relate to the work of the health action zones, for example — where we felt that we could bring improved partnership and better regional focus to the provision of those services. We seek to strike a balance, therefore, between what is brought into central management and what is left to local control. That was in direct response to views that we heard during consultation.

Dr McBride: Tom Buchanan made an important point about ensuring that there is no duplication and used the example of community safety partnerships. We will try to ensure that staff in the health action zones and the Investing for Health partnerships work as one team.

Later in the legislation, we have placed a duty of public health and social well-being on trusts. That goes back to Dr Deeny's important point: it is about ensuring that those who work in health and social care do not regard their primary role on the front line as treating the sick, such as patients with acute myocardial infarction or diabetes. Instead, it is about working proactively to ensure that someone who has had acute myocardial infarction, for example, is given advice about diets, exercise programmes and smoking cessation. It is important that the staff in trusts retain their patient focus.

We want a Health Service where all staff, regardless of whether we are cardiologists or work with people who live with diabetes, say that their target is to no longer have people arriving at clinics with illnesses

such as diabetes. For that to happen, we all must address the problem of obesity.

The fundamental aim of the Bill is to realign health and social care and take it upstream. We must turn off the tap, because if we do not — as Derek Wanless stated — the Health Service will not be able to cope with the demographic changes in our population, the increase in life expectancy, people living with long-term conditions and the problems related to obesity and the diseases of modern society. Therefore, we must fundamentally change tack, move upstream and ensure that the majority of staff who work at the service end of health and social care regard that task as an important part of their job.

Mr Mitchell: That is referred to in clause 21.

Ms S Ramsey: Although I sympathise with what Alex and Tom are saying, investment is always made in acute care rather than community care. We must prevent illnesses; in my constituency, as with any other, the source of the problem must be tackled. If one organisation has control, the money will be lost, because it will be spent on treating illnesses rather tackling their source.

Mr Easton: I do not agree that money would be lost if there were a single organisation — that will not happen if the correct structures exist. If the Committee agrees, I could withdraw my proposal and the issue could be discussed next week when we could be provided with information on the cost of establishing the new agency and more details on its structures.

The Chairperson: I would suggest that we do not have a formal vote now. The risk is that the vote could go either way, and that could have significant implications for other parts of the Bill. I would prefer if we parked that proposal until we receive some clarification on costings and other points that were raised, including a better explanation on the points that Alex and Tom raised. I do not want to divide the Committee on the proposal.

Paragraph 7(3) of schedule 2 is wrongly drafted and, unless corrected, will result in a situation where RAPHSW committees have to comprise exclusively of regional board members. The words “regional board” should be replaced by “RAPHSW board”.

Mr McMaster: Yes; that is on page 29 of the Bill and is a drafting error caused by cutting and pasting.

The Chairperson: If the wording is not fixed now, we could be in trouble later.

We now move to clause 13, which details the functions of the regional agency for public health and social well-being. I invite Ivan to explain that clause.

Mr McMaster: Clause 13 details the agency’s functions and provides clarification in relation to those.

In very broad terms, clause 13(1) explains that the agency will have health-improvement and health-protection functions. Clauses 13(2) and 13(3) provide further details about those functions. Clause 13(2) refers to health improvement and to the agency’s requirement to take proactive steps to develop programmes and initiatives that will be targeted at improving the health and social well-being of the Northern Ireland public.

It should be noted that those are not solely targeted at health. Given our uniquely integrated service, those programmes and initiatives will also improve the social well-being of the public and will reduce health inequalities.

Clause 13(3) gives details of the agency’s envisaged health-protection functions that will protect the community — or any part of it — against communicable diseases. Currently, the main communicable diseases that are being dealt with are: measles; mumps; rubella; polio; tuberculosis; and hepatitis A, B and C.

Those functions will also deal with any other dangers to the health and social well-being of the public. Those wide-ranging duties are designed to cover anything that could be regarded as a danger. The power, therefore, is not limited at all, although it will often refer to more common dangers, such as environmental or public-health issues.

Clause 13(4) provides details of the areas in which the new agency will become involved in the exercising of those functions, such as undertaking research or providing laboratory, technical or clinical services. Clause 13(5) provides the Department with the power to alter the functions of the proposed new agency, either by adding or removing functions. That is a fairly new departure, and — in light of experience — the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety reserves the right to change those functions. Clause 29 will ensure that no Order that amends those functions will be made unless it is placed formally before, and debated in, the Assembly, so the Department will not be able to amend the functions without the Assembly’s approval.

Clause 13(6) states that the proposed new agency will be required to co-operate with other bodies. There is no limit on the bodies with which the agency must co-operate, and it is clear that the list is not even restricted to health- and social-care bodies. The agency will be required to co-operate with local councils in relation to environmental health functions and with such other bodies under any arrangement for joint working.

Clause 13(7) is a mirror image of clause 13(6), in that it requires any body referred to in that subsection to co-operate with the agency. Clause 13(8) is a technical inclusion that will provide the new agency

with protection, because it will be compelled to provide information by clauses 13(6) and 13(7). Any provision of information will not be regarded as a breach of restrictions on the disclosure of information that might apply. However, the agency must note that that does not formally authorise the disclosure of information that contravenes the Data Protection Act 1998.

Dr Deeny: Before the Committee considered the Bill, I was unclear about the proposed agency and its functions. However, I increasingly agree with my medical colleague Michael. I have spent 28 years of my life looking after the sick and treating diseases. More focus should be given to — and more finance should be provided for — disease prevention, as opposed to only the treatment of diseases. That is the future, particularly as the population is getting older, as Michael pointed out. If we have the resources, the time, the financial back-up and the support of an agency such as the one that is proposed, we would be able to prevent many diseases.

In the past, we waited until people became sick and then treated them. We are now trying to focus on preventing heart attacks, diabetes, strokes, and so forth, so I am increasingly seeing the benefits of the proposed agency.

Mrs McGill: Disability Action made the point that clause 13(2)(b) needs to be expanded to better outline the health-promotion function. Is that a valid point?

Mr Mitchell: Did it suggest a form of wording?

Mrs McGill: I have not seen a form of wording, but it may be included in its substantive response.

Mr Mitchell: Forgive me, but what was Disability Action's concern?

Mrs McGill: It felt that clause 13(2)(b) needs to be expanded to better outline the health-promotion function. It may have suggested a form of wording, but I do not have that information in front of me.

The Chairperson: Disability Action's opinion on this piece of legislation is that clause 13(2)(b) needs to be expanded to better outline the health-promotion function.

Mr Mitchell: We will take that away and consider a form of wording.

Dr McBride: We have not been restrictive at all. I am merely echoing the point that was made earlier about the health-protection or health-promotion function. The regional agency will be responsible for health and social well-being. We are happy to go away and consider any issues that you may have.

The Chairperson: Disability Action:

“commends the comprehensiveness of clause 13(2)(a) but believes that 13(2)(b) should be expanded to better outline the Health promotion function.”

It is not a very detailed point, but perhaps you could consider it. Members are generally happy, but obviously there will be an impact, depending on whether there are one or two authorities.

Mr Buchanan: The British Red Cross has suggested a form of wording to strengthen the clause. It suggests including the words “and risk reduction” after “health promotion”.

The Chairperson: Bernard, we are happy to give you a copy of the responses from those organisations, and you can come back to us with responses to them.

Ms S Ramsey: It would be useful if the Department were provided with a copy of those responses, because the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has suggested that clause 13(4)(e) should be amended to read:

“make available to any other body, after consultation with the Assembly Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, such persons, materials, information and facilities as are deemed appropriate.”

I know that we are nuisances, but the Committee should be included in clause 13.

The Chairperson: We are simply protecting our backs. The devil is in the detail.

Mr McMaster: May I just clarify that we are talking about clause 13(4)(e)? At the moment it reads: “make available to any other body”.

Ms S Ramsey: We are the real body.

Mr McMaster: You are not simply “any other body”. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: We could not possibly comment on that.

Dr McBride: I increasingly get the feeling that I am the Health Committee's personal physician, and I am sure that Sue will not require smoking cessation services or anything else.

The Chairperson: At this stage, I must rein everyone in and say that enough is enough.

We are generally happy, but we will come back to the issue of the two authorities next week when we get more detail on it.

Clause 14 relates to the regional support services organisation. Will you talk us through the clause together with the corresponding schedule 3. It is worth noting that the Central Services Agency had concerns about the title of the organisation and its acronym — RSSO.

Mr Mitchell: Are you content for the Chief Medical Officer to leave at this point?

The Chairperson: Of course. Thank you for your additional help on the issue of breast screening. I appreciate your speedy response to the matter.

(The Acting Chairperson [Ms S Ramsey] in the Chair)

Mr McMaster: Clause 14 creates a regional support services organisation as a body corporate — much like the organisations that we have been dealing with so far — and introduces schedule 3, which deals with the establishment of that organisation. Schedule 3 is somewhat different from schedules 1 and 2. It takes a different tack as the support services organisation will not provide services to the public. It is something of a new venture, so many of the provisions in relation to tenure of office and circumstances in which people can be removed or suspended from office, the appointment of committees, and so forth, will be provided through subordinate legislation, as set out in schedule 3. Initially, it is likely that that subordinate legislation will create an organisation that is a little different from the board and the agency. That is why schedule 3 differs from schedules 1 and 2.

Mr Easton: I have no problem except for the new organisation's acronym. Will you consider that? We do not want the organisation to be a laughing stock; it is a serious matter.

Mr Mitchell: There is a proposal to change the name of the organisation to the “regional business services organisation”. We would be content to consider that.

Mr Easton: That sounds better.

Mr McMaster: It started life as a “common services organisation”, but the use of the word “common” is not suitable, because the organisation must provide services for more than one body. The technical term “common” cannot be used, because it might be required to provide a particular service for one of the bodies. That is how we arrived at the regional support services organisation. I am afraid that we were not really thinking about acronyms at the time.

Mr Gallagher: Briefly, what services will the organisation provide?

Mr McMaster: I will come to that.

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee agrees to come back to the title of the organisation at next week's meeting. We will now move on to clause 15.

Mr McMaster: Clause 15 sets out the services that the organisation — I will call it the regional support services organisation, for the moment — is to provide. Clause 15(1) gives a general description that the organisation is to provide: “support services to other health and social care bodies in accordance with directions under subsection (4).”

Clause 15(2) broadly lists the services that need to be carried out on behalf of health and social care bodies. They are:

“(a) administrative support, advice and assistance;

- (b) financial services;
- (c) human resource, personnel and corporate services;
- (d) training;
- (e) the management and maintenance of buildings, equipment and land;
- (f) information technology and information management;
- (g) the procurement of goods and services;
- (h) legal, medical, scientific or other professional services;
- (i) contractual compliance, internal audit and fraud prevention.”

Those services are relevant to the contracts that boards currently hold with practitioners. Those are the services that the organisation is designed to provide.

Clause 15(3) requires the organisation to ensure that its arrangements for providing those services represent value for money for its customers and that they are provided in the most economic, efficient and effective way. To ensure that that is done, the organisation will be required to have those arrangements approved by the Department. It is implicit that, without such approval, the provision of the services to the bodies concerned cannot be commenced.

Clause 15(4) provides the Department with the power to control the flow of services to the new support services organisation by giving directions. The organisation will not take on everything from day one; there will be a drip-feeding of responsibilities. Some of the services will have to be provided by the organisations themselves, but, as time goes on, the services will be provided by the new support services organisation.

(The Chairperson [Mrs I Robinson] in the Chair)

This provision by direction gives a number of safeguards. It will ensure that health and social care bodies will use the organisation and not go elsewhere for their functions because that will be required under the directions. It will allow the Department to be satisfied that the organisation is properly equipped to carry out its functions, and it will enable a phased approach to be taken to the central provision of those functions. It will also ensure that health and social care bodies do not ask their organisations to carry out functions that are inappropriate. Anyone could ask this organisation to do something simply because it is too difficult or they do not like it — for example, the job of firing someone. This clause will prevent that type of action.

Clause 15(5) permits the regional support services organisation to charge its customers for the services that it provides. Clause 15(6) again provides the power for the Department to alter the functions of the new organisation and, similar to that provided by the proposed new agency, this will be done by an Order which will be brought before the Assembly. The Assembly would, therefore, have a say in that change — either adding to, or taking from, those functions.

Mrs McGill: Clause 15(3)(a) is mentioned in the responses to the Committee. The Northern Health and Social Services Board asks that the word “equitable” be added after “economic” and before “efficient”, so that the clause would read:

“secure that those services are provided in the most economic, equitable, efficient and effective way”.

I support that. Is that possible?

Mr Mitchell: I suppose that comes down to an assessment of what “equitable” means in the type of services that we are discussing. We are talking about supplies services, human resource functions, payroll functions and payments of accounts — operational, day-to-day transaction functions. That is largely what this new body is concerned with. The body’s customers are other health and social care bodies. When one asks if that works in an equitable way, all health and social care bodies are required to meet the obligations laid on them by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which informs how they do their business. It is difficult to give a commitment in legislation, given the nature of the services that the new organisation will provide. One wonders how it could be demonstrated that the type of service that I am talking about had been provided in an equitable way.

Mrs McGill: I understand what you are saying, but every Health Service is supposed to be equitable in all aspects. I do not find that to be the case. It depends, in many instances, on where you live. I would like to see the word “equitable” included, and I wonder why the Northern Board has asked for that in its response. Whatever the service happens to be — and you have outlined the services — I think that it would be good to have the word “equitable” included.

Mr Mitchell: I will take that away with me. We can think about the implications, but the new organisation’s support services will not be patient- or client-related.

The Chairperson: I understand your point about responsibilities under section 75, and I wonder why the Northern Board insisted on making that response.

We will formally agree clause 15 later. We will now move on to clause 16, which deals with the patient and client council.

Mr McMaster: Clause 16 establishes a new body to be known as the patient and client council, which will replace the four existing health and social services councils. Its function is explained in clause 17; however, it will deal primarily with patient and client representation in the new system. It introduces schedule 4, which deals with the status, membership and construction of the new body. Schedule 4 is almost the same as schedule 3, which is about the creation of the regional support services organisation. Details about appointments, tenure of office and the constitution

of committees will be provided for in subordinate legislation, which will come before this Committee at some stage.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 16 and schedule 4 at a later stage. That brings the Committee to clause 17, which deals with the functions of the patient and client council. Will you briefly talk members through that clause, Ivan?

Mr McMaster: Clause 17(1) sets out the four main functions of the proposed patient and client council, which include representing the interests of the public. That involves ascertaining the views of the public and ensuring that their views are conveyed accurately. It must be noted that they should be the public’s views and not those of the staff of the patient and client council.

Clause 17(1)(b) states that the patient and client council will have a role in “promoting involvement of the public”. That refers to the active role that the body must play in encouraging people to become involved in such things as consultation exercises and other processes that lead to decisions that may affect the public’s health and social well-being.

Clause 17(1)(c) explains the council’s role in providing assistance to individuals who seek help with complaints against health and social care bodies.

The council will also engage in “promoting the provision” of advice and information in relation to health and social care bodies. It should be noted that the intention contained in clause 17(1)(d) is not necessarily that the patient and client council prepares and issues advice but that it should proactively encourage and drive other bodies to get out information on appropriate matters.

Clause 17(1)(e) refers to “such other functions” as the Department would take a power to prescribe by regulations. That provides some flexibility to add other functions to the first four paragraphs that I have explained.

Clause 17(2) gives more detail about the issue of representing the public. Similarly, clause 17(3) provides further detail about the function of promoting the involvement of the public. Likewise, clause 17(4) gives more information about the function of providing assistance to individuals making complaints. Clause 17(5) requires the patient and client council to seek examples from any source of “best methods and practices” in order to promote the participation of the public in how health and social care is designed, commissioned and delivered.

Clause 17(6) reverts back to clause 17(2)(b), which requires the patient and client council to consult with the public. Clause 17(6) also requires the patient and client council to report publicly on any issues on which it has consulted.

Clause 17(7) defines “the public” as widely as people may wish to interpret it. The clause is simply there in order to clarify that “public” may refer to:

“individuals, a group or community of people and a section of the public”.

Clause 17(8) lists the bodies to which the provisions of clauses 17, 18 and 19 apply. Clause 18 deals with the duty to co-operate with the patient and client council, and clause 19 deals with public involvement and consultation. All the health and social care bodies that are referred to in the Bill are on that list, with the exception of the regional support services organisation and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. That is mainly because those bodies do not provide services to the general public.

Clause 17(9) clarifies what is meant by the phrase, a body which is:

“responsible for health and social care”.

If the Committee wishes, I will deal with issues related to that.

Mrs McGill: Disability Action is concerned that disabled people can be excluded from consultation, and it suggests adding the words “in an accessible way” to clause 17(2)(a), so that it would read: “consult the public in an accessible way about matters relating to health and social care.”

Mr McMaster: Like any public body, the patient and client council falls under the requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and, therefore, it is bound to ensure that no member or part of the community is excluded from any consultation.

Mrs McGill: I quoted what Disability Action said, and I do not want to ignore that. That organisation did not make that point because it believes that consultation is always accessible.

The Chairperson: That issue is also raised by Disability Action’s second point.

Mrs McGill: In its response to clause 17(4), Disability Action states: “It needs to be clarified if this clause refers to reasonable adjustments under the Disability Discrimination Act or not.”

The Chairperson: I presume that the officials will take those points away for consideration and that they will come back to the Committee when we get to the stage of formally agreeing the clause.

We will now move on to clause 18, which deals with the duty to co-operate with the patient and client council.

Mr McMaster: Clause 18 is intended to place some sense of duty on the bodies to co-operate with the patient and client council in the carrying out of its functions and, for the first time, to put that requirement in statute. Up until now, there has been an almost tacit agreement that the bodies will co-operate with the

patient and client council. Clause 18 puts that into statute.

Clause 18(1) places an onus on the health and social care bodies to co-operate. The Bill does not define “co-operate”; the definition is as broad or narrow as it can be taken. Clause 18(2) states:

“In particular, such a body must —

(a) consult the Patient and Client Council with respect to such matters, and on such occasions, as the body considers appropriate”.

We considered that the consultation should be on such matters as the patient and client council considered appropriate. To do that, however, would run the risk of tying the body up in consultation all the time, so it was felt that leaving it to the body to consult with the patient and client council as it considers appropriate was the right way to go. The patient and client council has the option of asking the Department to take action if it believes that the bodies are not playing the game.

Clause 18(2)(b) places a duty on the bodies to furnish to the council — in this case, the patient and client council — with such information that it considers necessary. It is considered that that provision of information would not tie up the body to the same extent that formal consultations would. Therefore, it should provide information that the patient and client council considers to be appropriate.

Clause 18(3) provides that, in order for the patient and client council to carry out its functions effectively, officers will need to have access to premises that are controlled by health and social care bodies and, indeed, certain other bodies. Clause 18(4) sets out the other types of premises that the patient and client council are entitled to enter, in addition to those of the health and social care bodies. Those are other buildings that belong to them, such as surgeries, pharmacies and opticians.

Clause 18(5) confirms a limitation on that right to enter. The right to enter is limited to allowing the patient and client council to carry out its functions. In other words, it cannot use that right to do anything it likes on those premises; it is limited to carrying out its functions of representing the interests of the public and promoting the public’s involvement in health.

Clause 18(6) explains that health and social care bodies must have regard to the views expressed by the patient and client council. The phrase “have regard to” means that those bodies must think strongly about those views, and only where there are strong reasons for doing otherwise should they not agree with the patient and client council.

Dr Deeny: I prefer the expression “patient council” over “client council”; I do not like the word “client”.

One need not be sick in order to be called a patient. I have 8,200 patients, not clients.

I am concerned about clause 18(1):

“A body to which this section applies must co-operate with the Patient and Client Council in the exercise by the Council of its functions.”

That is too general. What is meant by a “body”? Does that include, for example, the trusts, local commissioning groups, agencies, boards and, indeed, the Department?

Mr McMaster: Yes, it does. Clause 17(8) states: “This section and sections 18 and 19 apply to —

- (a) the Department;
- (b) the Regional Board;
- (c) RAPHSW;
- (d) HSC trusts; and
- (e) special agencies.”

Dr Deeny: They must all co-operate.

Clause 18(6) states:

“A body to which this section applies shall have regard to any views expressed by the Patient and Client Council”.

To “have regard to any views” is non-committal; I might have regard for your views, but then say to hell with them. I suggest that the phrase:

“and act on any views expressed”

should be inserted. There is no point in having regard to any views expressed — perhaps on behalf of the public and perhaps making suggestions about what healthcare the public requires — by the patient and client and council. Inserting the phrase that I suggested would mean that some action will be taken rather than merely listening to opinions.

The Chairperson: Perhaps it should say “due” regard, which would mean that one could have input, even though that input may not be correct. Kieran’s suggestion implies that someone’s input should be acted on even if it is incorrect. “Due” regard would address that point but retain discretion.

Mr McMaster: We will certainly consider that.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree the clause later. We will move on to clause 19, which concerns public involvement and consultation.

Mr McMaster: Clause 19 will apply to the same list of bodies. It is about public involvement in the planning and delivery of statutory services, and it places a duty on bodies to provide information, to research the population’s requirements and to encourage and assist people. In particular, health and social care bodies will be required to demonstrate, by producing a consultation scheme, how they intend to consult with the public about service provision. It will

not be sufficient for such bodies to wait to be asked; they will have to publish information proactively about requirements and make that information known to the public. Users to whom care is provided will have to be proactively told about services and encouraged and assisted to use them appropriately. That obligation is about promoting cost-effectiveness in the health- and social-care system — for example, if the assistance required by patients can be provided cheaper by their consulting with pharmacists rather than with GPs, such means must be encouraged.

Given that prevention is better than cure, bodies will be required to encourage and assist people to help themselves mentally and physically, and to be aware of how to look after themselves, using diet, fitness and self-examination.

Clause 19(2) places a statutory duty on each body to produce a consultation scheme within nine months of the day appointed, and to send that consultation scheme to the Department, which will then examine the scheme and decide whether to approve it.

Mrs McGill: Disability Action suggests that, in clause 19(1)(a), the words “in accessible formats” should be inserted so that it reads: “to promulgate information, in accessible formats”.

Perhaps you could consider that when you are looking at the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

The Chairperson: Ivan, apart from that, we are in agreement. We will formally agree the clause later.

We will now move on to clause 20, which deals with public involvement and consultation schemes.

Mr McMaster: The main function of clause 20 is to provide some detail on the consultation schemes. It specifies that the scheme must show clearly what arrangements the body will employ to canvas the views of the patient and client council and service users, or their representatives — including their carers — on matters specified in clause 20(2) relating to health and social care. Those matters are: the planning of how the services are to be provided — that is, the nature and delivery of the service; the development and consideration of change, however big or small, and the way in which those services are provided; and operational decisions around the delivery of that care, which will include such factors as surgery opening hours, for instance.

Clause 20(3) provides details on what a health and social care body to which this clause applies must do with the responses. It must have regard to those comments, and I appreciate that the Committee has concerns about the phrase “have regard to”. The body must also prepare a written statement that sums up all the comments received and sets out the body’s response to the comments.

Clause 20(4) states that the consultation scheme must provide that the body to which it is to apply will give adequate publicity to the statement. In other words, it is not enough for the body to make a mere statement; it must publicise the fact that it has made a statement on the issues raised.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree the clause later. We now move on to clause 21, which deals with the duty on health and social care trusts in relation to improvement of health and social well-being.

Mr McMaster: In general, the Bill bestows a number of functions on all the newly established bodies that directly or indirectly provide health and social care. Amid all the other competing priorities, it is important that the organisations do not lose sight of the overarching drive for improvements in health and social well-being.

Those duties already apply to the Department, because it has a general duty of care under clause 2 of the Bill. It also applies to the regional board, because it is charged with carrying out the Department's general duties. It also applies to the regional agency, as is mentioned in clause 13(2)(a), which states that the agency is to develop and secure programmes designed to secure the improvement of health and well-being.

Clause 21 ensures that the overarching desire to secure such improvements is an integral part of the work of the trusts, despite any competing priorities that those trusts might have. It makes it clear that trusts, in the exercise of their functions, must also do this:

"with the aim of improving the health and social well-being of those for whom it provides".

Bernard referred to clause 21 earlier.

Mrs McGill: The Community Development and Health Network has asked that, in clause 21, the words

"and reducing health inequalities between"

be inserted so that it would read:

"It is the duty of an HSC trust to exercise its functions with the aim of improving the health and social well-being of, and reducing health inequalities between, those for whom it provides, or may provide, health and social care."

That goes back to the issue of inequalities that were previously discussed. Could that insertion be considered?

The Chairperson: Would that be absorbed under section 75?

Mr McMaster: Yes, but it is one of a number of responses that you have asked us to consider.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree the clause later. We move on now to clause 22, which deals with public-private partnerships.

Mr McMaster: Clause 22 provides for the Department, the regional board, the proposed regional

agency, the regional support services organisation, special agencies and trusts to participate in public-private partnerships (PPPs) with companies to provide facilities or services to persons or bodies. That path is open to all those bodies and the clause is intended as a clarification not an advocacy; it is more of a permissive power, and it simply sets out the provisions for that. We are establishing a number of new bodies, and clause 22 simply highlights the fact that public-private partnership is an avenue that is open to them.

The Chairperson: The health and social services councils have some concerns. They:

"believe that this clause should include a reference to ensuring the long-term financial viability and value of any such public-private partnership before entering into it."

All of us have a major concern about the long-term costs and that it should provide value for money. Perhaps you could take on board that this cannot be a short-term fix that will take a long time to pay back.

Mrs Hanna: Will you clarify if this is a new arrangement? I am very sceptical of PPPs, and certainly will not be ticking the box on anything that increases their number. I do not think that PPPs should be in the Health Service at all, or at least, if they are, absolute best value for money must be demonstrated. Will you explain again what is happening?

Mr McMaster: Trusts have some legislative provisions for PPPs, but I cannot honestly tell you which pieces of legislation they are. We are establishing a new structure, and the purpose of clause 22 is to make it clear that public-private partnerships are a viable option, and to which bodies that will be applied. At the moment, trusts can enter into those partnerships.

Mrs Hanna: Does clause 22 clarify that they have the power to make that decision?

Mr McMaster: It clarifies that not only trusts but other bodies have the power to enter into public-private partnerships.

Mrs Hanna: Have they always had that power?

Mr McMaster: They have always had that power.

Mrs Hanna: I thought that the Department would have taken that decision.

Mr McMaster: No; at the moment, there are some powers directly bestowed on the trusts to do that.

Mr Mitchell: My understanding of clause 22 is that it eliminates any uncertainty. Those bodies listed have the legal right to enter into an appropriate private-finance arrangement, subject to passing those hurdles that the Chairperson mentioned. Any arrangement will have to be as a result of a business case, be best value for money and pass all those hurdles. There was no particular scheme in mind when this proposal was; it

was proposed to avoid doubt. If the service needs to use a scheme such as this, it has to be quite clear to the bodies, and to the private sector with which they are dealing, that there is a legal basis for that partnership. That is the only reason that the clause is here.

Mrs Hanna: There is concern about clause 22; may we leave it until next week? We are supposed to be making things clearer, but, as somebody who is opposed to PPPs, if I tick that box, I am saying that PPPs are fine. Tommy Gallagher is not here, and, if he were, he would also want to comment on clause 22.

The Chairperson: We can agree on that next week. We will now move on to clause 23, which deals with schemes for the transfer of assets and liabilities.

Mr McMaster: The simplest way of explaining clause 23 is that, in some cases, it requires the Department, and, in other cases, gives the Department the power to make schemes that provide for the transfer of assets and liabilities. That includes the transfer of staff from the bodies that are being dissolved and subsumed into the new organisations.

Clause 23(4) is important, because it extends the Department's powers to make one or more schemes "at any time" for the transfer of designated assets or liabilities. Under Clause 23(2), the Department must have schemes in place into which it can transfer the assets and liabilities of the bodies that it dissolves now, whereas clause 23(4) provides for adjustments that we may have to make at some stage in the future. It confers the power, if needed in the future, to make further schemes for the transfer of designated assets to the health and social care bodies.

Schedule 5, which I will address with clause 23, contains further detail and clarification about those transfer schemes. Paragraph 2 of schedule 5 deals with the transfer of employed staff. Paragraph 2(2) states that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 — known as the TUPE regulations — will apply to transferring employees.

Paragraph 2(3) of schedule 5 states:

"The scheme shall —

(a) in relation to each transferee, identify the transferring employees (whether by name or otherwise);

(b) include provision securing pension protection for such employees;

(c) include provision for procedures designed to resolve any grievances of such employees arising in relation to matters dealt with by the scheme; and

(d) include provision for the payment of compensation by the Department to any such employee who suffers loss or detriment in consequence of the scheme."

Paragraph 2(4) of schedule 5 states:

"Before making the scheme the Department must consult —

(a) in the case of a scheme which identifies transferring employees by name, those employees".

Paragraph 4 of schedule 5 deals with the completion of accounts and reports of dissolved bodies. Obviously, those bodies will not exist after April 2009 so their accounts must be completed by someone. The accounts of the four health and social services boards will be completed by the proposed new regional board. The Central Service Agency's accounts will be completed by the regional support services organisation, or whatever it will be called in the future, and the Mental Health Commission's reports will be completed by the RQIA. Paragraph 4 provides a continuation of those types of issues following the transfer of staff and assets.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 23 and schedule 5 later. We will move on to clause 24, which deals with the transfer of functions of the health and social services boards.

Mr McMaster: Clause 24 provides for the transfer of functions of the existing health and social services boards. After the date of transfer, functions that relate to health-improvement functions or health protection will be exercisable by the agency.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 24 later. Ivan, will you explain the purpose of clause 25?

Mr McMaster: Clause 25 provides for the transfer of functions from the Mental Health Commission to the RQIA.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 25 later. Will you explain the purpose of clause 26?

Mr McMaster: Clause 26 provides for the transfer of functions from the Central Services Agency to the new regional support services organisation. However, clause 26(3) states: "The Department may by order provide that subsection (1) is not to apply to any specified function."

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 26 later. We will move on to clause 27, which provides for the amendment of statutory and other references to dissolved bodies.

Mr McMaster: Clause 27 deals with any references in legislation to the bodies that are being dissolved. Throughout legislation there are numerous mentions to the health and social services boards, and the other bodies that are being dissolved. Therefore, clause 27 grants generic provision for those references to be construed as references to the new bodies.

Clause 27(2) states:

"In relation to any time after the transfer date, any reference in any statutory provision or document to a Health and Social Services Board (whether general or particular) shall —

(a) in relation to any function transferred by section 24(1), be construed as a reference to RAPHSW;

(b) in relation to any function transferred by section 24(2), be construed as a reference to the Regional Board.”

The same applies for references to the Central Services Agency and the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland. The clause provides for a generic way of correcting those references rather than our having to amend every single one.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 27 later. We will now move on to clause 28, which deals with the dissolution of special agencies.

Mr McMaster: Under clause 28, two special agencies are being dissolved — the Health Promotion Agency and the Northern Ireland Regional Medical Physics Agency. Those agencies were established under the Health and Personal Social Services (Special Agencies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1990. However, when we were formulating the Bill, we discovered that the provisions of that Order were defective and did not contain a power that allowed us to transfer the assets and liabilities of those special agencies; the agencies could be wound up, but we could not do anything with their assets or liabilities. Therefore, clause 28 is an amendment to that Order that allows us the capacity to make that transfer.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 28 later. We will now move on to clause 29, which deals with orders, regulations, guidance and directions.

Mr McMaster: Clause 29 outlines what sort of procedure should be used in respect of the subordinate legislation Orders, regulations and directions. For example, clause 29(1) relates to instances when the functions of the regional agency or the regional support services organisation are altered, or when an Order is made that allows a Department to do something that will give full effect to the Bill. Such Orders cannot be made until they are laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly. In general, regulations are made through negative resolution and will, at some stage, come before the Committee. Therefore, clause 29 outlines a technical procedure that allows such Orders to be made.

The Chairperson: You have mentioned regulations being made subject to negative resolution; was any consideration given to affirmative resolution in relation to clause 29(2)?

Mr McMaster: At the moment, the provision is for negative resolution.

Clause 24(4) relates to instances when the functions of the health and social services boards will not be split as is specified in the Bill, and clause 26(3) relates to instances when the functions of the Central Services Agency will not be as directed in the Bill. The Bill states that the functions of the health and social services boards will, generally, be split between the regional

agency and the regional board and that, broadly, the functions of the Central Services Agency will go to the regional support services organisation. Those regulations relate to instances when the contrary would apply. As the Bill is drafted, that would be done by negative resolution.

The Chairperson: Will you humour me and tease out when it might be regulations as opposed to Orders — can you explain that to me, please?

Mr McMaster: No, I cannot. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Good grief.

Mr McMaster: That is the draftsman in me. They are both pieces of subordinate legislation that confer different powers. I will come back with clarity on that for you next week, if you wish.

The Chairperson: Yes, please do that. We will leave that until next week. We will now move on to clause 30, which relates to further provision.

Mr McMaster: Clause 30 is a general provision in the Bill. It allows the Department to make, by subordinate legislation, any provisions that it feels are necessary to give effect to the Bill. It provides for instances when it is found that something has, accidentally, been left out of the Bill. Rather than producing a piece of primary legislation to provide for something that has been missed out when the Bill was formulated, it allows us to provide for that by subordinate legislation. Such subordinate legislation will still come before the Committee; it is simply a quicker method of ensuring that what we want to happen will happen on time. It has been included just in case we have forgotten bits and pieces, which we all do.

The Chairperson: Yes; we are all human, we can err. We will formally agree clause 30 later. We will now move on to clause 31, which relates to interpretation.

Mr McMaster: Clause 31 contains a list of definitions for terms that are used in the Bill.

The Chairperson: That is straightforward. We will formally agree clause 31 later. We will now move on to clause 32, which deals with minor and consequential amendments.

Mr McMaster: Clause 32 simply introduces schedule 6, which lists a considerable number of amendments that are consequential to the changes that are being made. It mainly involves the names of organisations, and so on.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 32 later. We will move on to clause 33, which deals with repeals.

Mr McMaster: Clause 33 introduces schedule 7, which deals with legislation that must be repealed. As I said at an earlier meeting, we are not repealing

legislation in general, but some specific provisions must be repealed, such as those that establish the boards, the Central Services Agency and the health and social services councils.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 33 later. We will move on to clause 34, which deals with commencement.

Mr McMaster: Clause 34 details when the various provisions of the Bill will come into operation. Those listed at clause 34(1) will come into effect immediately upon Royal Assent. They include: the duties and powers to make schemes in relation to the transfer of assets; the insertions into the Health and Personal Social Services (Special Agencies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1990; and technical provisions that allow for the making of Orders and regulations, and so on. Those provisions need to be in effect from day one.

Subsection 34(2) states:

“The following provisions come into operation on Royal Assent insofar as they confer power to make regulations or orders —”

It goes on to list those provisions. All other provisions will require a commencement Order, which is subordinate legislation that will come before the Committee. The Order will simply state that the provisions will come into effect on a particular date. It may be that the target date for the establishment of the new structures — 1 April 2009 — cannot be met, so that provision allows for some flexibility.

The Chairperson: We will formally agree clause 34 later. Clause 35 deals with the short title, which is self-explanatory. We can all grasp that, so there should be no need for any questions. We will formally agree the clause at a later meeting.

We now move on to the remaining schedules. We have already dealt with schedule 5, which covers the transfer of assets, and so on. Schedule 6 deals with minor and consequential amendments.

Mr McMaster: There are a couple of technical changes to schedule 6. Again, there were drafting errors — perhaps I should not call them that; our draftsmen would not particularly like it. At page 53, line 39, paragraph 18(1) provides for an amendment to sections 51(1) and 51(2) of the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. It reads: “in subsections (1) and (2) for ‘or the Agency’ substitute ‘, the Regional Board or RAPHSW’;”.

That line deals with the Central Services Agency, and it should read the “regional support services organisation”. That is a mistake. It does not reflect any change in policy; it should always have mentioned the regional support services organisation, or whatever name it will be given in future.

The Chairperson: That is everything except for schedule 7, which deals with repeals.

Mr McMaster: That schedule simply lists the legislation that we are repealing.

The Chairperson: I do not think that, at this stage, we will start the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny — I see the relief on members’ faces. I thank Ivan, Craig and Bernard for their much-appreciated help in explaining the Bill so clearly. A number of issues were queried, and DV, I hope that we will get more clarification on them. We can then begin to agree each of the clauses and schedules formally. Thank you for your attendance.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

23 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 Billy Armstrong
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): We will now move to the Committee's consideration of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. We have completed taking evidence on the Bill, and will proceed with clause-by-clause scrutiny after recess. If extra meetings are necessary, we will use them. Members have been provided with a paper that outlines the various issues that were raised during the evidence sessions, by organisations through written submissions and by members through deliberations on the Bill.

Members should note that the issues paper produced by the Committee staff lists the issues raised against the relevant clauses of the Bill. The departmental Bill team has provided assistance in identifying the relevant clauses, and has provided a departmental response to each issue in the paper provided. A copy of the Department's response of 16 October 2008 to the Committee's request for details of enforcement actions taken over the past five years has been provided for information.

I will run quickly through some of the issues that we will be considering. Members should take time between now and the next meeting in order to be satisfied that all the issues that they have raised have

been included; there will be an opportunity to make additional points where appropriate.

Mr T Clarke: Before we start, were we not still to receive an update from the Planning Service on those matters?

The Chairperson: We are still waiting for that. We have not had any communication back yet. We have moved to our consideration of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill. The Assistant Clerk tells me that a response has received, and will be included in the papers for our next meeting.

Mr Ford: The general issues that are outlined at the front of the table of responses include matters that are of concern to me. We had some discussion about the traffic commissioner. When will we have the opportunity to further engage the Department on issues such as that? They are not covered in any of the clauses of the Bill as currently drafted.

The Chairperson: We will have to raise that issue with the Department.

The Committee Clerk: They will be present at the next meeting, and will have something to say about those general comments.

Mr Ford: Will they make comments on the general issues?

The Committee Clerk: They have led me to believe that they will.

Mr Ford: Will you lead them to believe that we expect them to do that?

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

Mr T Clarke: Could you go slightly further? We do not necessarily want to hear comments. We have heard this fluffy talk before about guidance. I would like to see some sort of policy that backs up the guidance that we have been given in the past.

The Chairperson: OK. I will run through the issues briefly. Clause 1 deals with the types of vehicles that will be subject to operator licensing. It includes the 3.5 ton weight threshold and provides for exemptions. Members may wish to consider the possibility of requiring secondary legislation-raising powers in the clause to be subject to draft affirmative procedure.

Clause 6 deals with the definition and use of operating centres. Clause 11 is concerned with objections to operating centres during the application process. Clause 12 relates to the determination of applications for operators' licences, including the power to prescribe a date when stricter professional competence requirements could be attached to restricted licences.

Clause 20 allows for the Department to add further conditions to licences over time. The Examiner of

Statutory Rules recommends that the Committee consider requiring the broad secondary legislation-raising power at clause 12 (1)(d) to be subject to draft affirmative procedure.

Clause 27 deals with the frequency of review of operating centres. Members should note that secondary legislation-raising powers under clause 27 (3) are subject to draft affirmative procedure.

Clause 56 provides for powers to amend, repeal or modify statutory provision. With agreement from the Committee last week, the Department has been asked for more information on how it envisages exercising those powers, but members should note that any Orders under this clause will be subject to draft affirmative procedure.

Clause 57 creates additional offences relating to the Bill. At last week's meeting, the Committee asked the Department to provide details on the level 3 fine, confirm that the additional offences created were necessary and indicate how they will exercise those powers. The Examiner of Statutory Rules recommends that the Committee requires clause 57(8) to be subject to affirmative procedure.

Clause 60 provides for commencement dates for bringing certain clauses into operation. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has drawn the Committee's attention to the degree of overlap between clause 60 and clause 56 and notes that orders raised under this clause appear not to be subject to any Assembly proceedings.

It would be useful to have this synopsis emailed to members, because it will add some focus to their consideration.

Mr I McCrea: Some of the pages are running into each other.

The Chairperson: I noticed that.

Mr I McCrea: For instance, page 10 runs on to page 11, and some words are missing.

The Chairperson: We will try to get another copy emailed to members.

Mr Beggs: I want to return to how we finished the last discussion. I accept that there was a lack of transparency, but I think that most members would accept also that there was considerable evidence of special scientific interest in the area. If we say that the whole process is flawed, it may well be disregarded and put to bed.

The Chairperson: We did not say that the whole process was flawed; the consultation element based on the complete information provided to the local residents was flawed.

Mr Beggs: We moved over that quickly, and there was not much opportunity to comment. It struck me

that the Department could park the whole area and say that it does not want to do anything in this area, because it has been negated by the Committee. It is right to state that there were flaws in the process, and a lack of transparency, but we need to say that there were significant areas of scientific interest in the area.

Mr T Clarke: How did you find that without the information?

Mr Beggs: There is a whole series of reports there. We will be belittling ourselves if we rubbish everything and leave it parked.

The Chairperson: We did not rubbish everything. We rubbish the consultation element of the process and the lack of information that was provided.

Mr Beggs: We made no comment on anything else.

The Chairperson: We did not need to. We are working on the presumption that everything else is correct, and it is hoped that it is.

Mr T Clarke: I would not work on that presumption. I believe that the opposite is true. I believe that it should not be designated until they make a proper case and go through the correct process. What is the point of going through a consultation process that is flawed? How can one support such a process? We should not support the designation until — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Beggs: I am not saying that we should be supporting it; we should not leave it as if we believe there were no areas of interest there.

The Chairperson: We can get the scientific evidence, and, if needs be, we can follow it up with further briefings from officials.

Mr T Clarke: I could not support the designation as it stands until all those issues are ironed out.

Mr Beggs: I am comfortable that there was a lack of transparency, but there are significant areas of interest in the area.

The Chairperson: There probably are, as there are everywhere else. Trevor is saying that the whole process is inadequate, because the consultation element was incomplete.

Mr T Clarke: In fairness to the landowners, they have asked for that document on more than one occasion — to enable them to make their presentation.

The Chairperson: We have bounced over some items of business. We will return to that issue under any other business.

A synopsis document on the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill is being passed round the Committee.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

23 October 2008

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (REFORM) BILL (NIA 21/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sue Ramsey (Acting Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Sam Gardiner
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister
Mrs Claire McGill

Witnesses:

Mr Craig Allen	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Dr Carolyn Harper		
Mr Ivan McMaster		
Mr Bernard Mitchell		

The Acting Chairperson (Ms S Ramsey): We now move on to the Committee's formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill.

The Committee Clerk: This is the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. The Committee must formally consider the Bill's clauses and agree whether each clause, as it is drafted, should stand. In the past couple of weeks, members have raised concerns about several clauses. The Department agreed to consider whether the Committee's proposals were acceptable. The Committee can decide to table any proposal that has been rejected by the Department as an amendment at the Bill's Consideration Stage and include it in the report. It may be useful for the Committee to consider the acceptable clauses today and defer the others until the next meeting.

Mr Buchanan: The Department has accepted some of the Committee's proposals and rejected others. I ask that the clause-by-clause consideration is deferred until

the next meeting so that the Committee has sufficient time to establish what the Department's problems were with the proposals that it rejected.

Mrs McGill: Are all the issues that the Committee raised — such as my point about equality — dealt with in the correspondence?

Mr Bernard Mitchell (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): To the best of our knowledge, the correspondence that has been provided to the Committee covers every point that was raised. We have highlighted a couple of additional items for the Committee's attention. We have tried to ensure that the Department's letter to the Committee, dated 22 October, is comprehensive and that there are no surprises for the Committee.

Mrs McGill: Did we just get that letter now?

The Acting Chairperson: Yes, we did.

Let me clarify the situation. There are some clauses in the Bill that the Committee had concerns about and wished to amend. The Department has accepted some of those amendments and rejected others. The first suggestion is that we deal with the non-contentious clauses and defer the others until a later date. The other proposal is that we defer everything today.

Mr Gallagher: I am happy to deal with the non-contentious clauses today.

The Acting Chairperson: We are under pressure to complete the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Mr Gardiner: If that is the case, we should deal with the amendments that the Department has accepted and not hold the Bill back.

Mr Buchanan: We have continuously raised the issue of the regional agency. I do not see anything on the list of recommendations from the Department that suggests that it has either accepted or rejected our proposal on that issue. I made the point very strongly that there was no need for such an agency and that its functions could be carried out by the regional board.

The Acting Chairperson: We will not even discuss that clause today, because it is contentious.

Mr Buchanan: If I can have an assurance that the issue will be discussed at a later date, I will be happy to defer it today.

The Acting Chairperson: Bernard, I am suggesting that we deal with the non-contentious clauses.

Mrs McGill: I raised several concerns about disability-related matters. Issues were raised by Disability Action, if I remember correctly. I have not had time to consider these amendments. I know that the Department has rejected some of them.

The Acting Chairperson: That is the Department's job now. It will report back and let us know which amendments it has accepted or rejected.

Mrs McGill: Is that in front of us? I see no point in a process in which a Department, or any Government body, asks organisations such as Disability Action to respond to a consultation, and a member of the Committee picks up on that response and raises it with departmental officials. A paper then comes before me, but I cannot see what the situation is; it is too rushed for me. Such a paper might be brilliant, but I do not see any point in asking organisations such as Disability Action for their views. I mention Disability Action only because I remember raising a couple of points about disability and equality.

The Acting Chairperson: Let me just clear things up for the record. Several concerns have been raised in the past few weeks by members of the Committee and by respondents to the consultation. What we now propose to do is deal with the amendments that the Department has accepted. The amendments that have been rejected by the Department will not be dealt with today. We will defer discussion of those amendments.

Mr Mitchell: I will clarify things from our perspective. We were asked to present a separate paper with some additional facts on the issue of the regional agency. We have done that. It is not that we are trying to avoid the issue.

We expect that to be discussed under the heading of the separate paper. The issues from Disability Action to which you are referring are issues that we have not accepted, so they would be deferred for discussion at a later date.

Where the Department has not accepted recommendations, generally — not exclusively — the only two reasons for rejection are because the draftsman has told us that he thinks that there are difficulties with the form of wording that is being proposed or that the issue is covered by other legislation, and, consequently, we think that it would result in duplication if it were to be included in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. I am happy that we get the chance to discuss those points one by one, including the issue of the agency.

Clause 1 (Restructuring of administration of health and social care)

The Acting Chairperson: Issues were raised about clause 1; the Department has rejected one of the Committee's recommendations.

Mr Ivan McMaster (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): There were two issues about clause 1. The suggestion that the agency be called the "health and social care RQIA" has been rejected; the suggestion that the acronym RAPHSW is

unwieldy and should be altered has been accepted. May we refer the clause?

Clause 1 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 2 and 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Department's priorities and objectives)

The Acting Chairperson: It was suggested that the word "extreme" be inserted before "urgency", and the Department's recommendation is that it be rejected.

Clause 4 referred for further consideration.

Clause 5 (The framework document)

Mr McMaster: The existing wording in clause 5(5) (b) is that the Department "may consult", but the suggestion was made that the wording be changed to the Department "will consult". The Department accepts that.

Mr Gallagher: Does this clause refer only to the Department?

Mr McMaster: Yes, it does. The Department: "may consult any other bodies or persons the Department considers appropriate."

The suggestion was that "may" should be changed to "will", and we accept that.

Mr Gallagher: At some point, I raised concern about the trusts' duty to consult with the users. Is that something that comes up in the regulations?

Mr Mitchell: There is a legislative requirement for all the bodies to produce a consultation scheme that indicates how they would consult with service users and other stakeholders. That is provided for.

Mr Gallagher: It would be useful to know where that is.

Mr Mitchell: That is in clause 20.

Mr McMaster: There are issues to be raised when we get to that clause.

Mr Gallagher: We can leave those issues until we reach that stage in consideration.

The Acting Chairperson: The Department has agreed to accept the recommendation from the Committee.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 5, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 6 referred for further consideration.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Functions of the Regional Board)

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members were otherwise content with this clause as drafted, but there was an issue about the Minister's views on joint sign-off.

Mr Mitchell: The Department was keen to ensure that there will be no surprises for members when the Bill is presented. The Department has stated a couple of times that it is considering a joint sign-off. The fact that that was happening was merely being put on the record, and a form of words was being sought on the issue.

Clause 8 referred for further consideration.

Clause 9 (Local Commissioning Groups)

The Acting Chairperson: Members were concerned about the wording of clause 9(4)(b)(i), which states that the groups must: "consult RAPHSW and have due regard to any advice or information provided by it".

Officials had agreed to consider a call from the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) to strengthen that provision. The Department is recommending that the Committee accepts clause 9(4)(b)(i) with an amended form of wording. Bernard, will you explain that?

Mr Mitchell: Michelle O'Neill presented, on behalf of the RCN, a form of wording that included what, for me, was the most important part — that local commissioning groups must work in partnership with the regional agency. The Department has consulted with the legislative draftsman, and a form of words has been produced that I hope addresses that point while at the same time embracing the requirement to have due regard to the advice and information provided by the agency. In all fairness, since the point was raised by Michelle, the Committee may wish to consider her view on that.

Clause 9 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 10 and 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (The Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being)

The Acting Chairperson: Is Thomas Buchanan not here? The Committee should slide in clause 12 while he is not here. *[Laughter.]* I am joking.

Mr Gardiner: Will that be done on the Temporary Chairperson's recommendation? *[Laughter.]*

Clause 12 referred for further consideration.

Clause 13 (Functions of RAPHSW)

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members raised questions about clause 13(2)(b) — health promotion — and suggested that a new provision be included in clause 13(4)(e), which requires that the RAPHSW: "make available to any

other body such persons, materials and facilities as it thinks appropriate".

The Department has agreed to accept that, in relation to clause 13(2)(b), officials will suggest a wording along the following lines to the legislative draftsmen:

"the health promotion function is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health and social well-being".

However, the Department rejected a suggestion to include the words:

"including the Assembly Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee"

after the words "any body" in clause 13(4)(e), which states that the RAPHSW may:

"make available to any other body such persons, materials and facilities as it thinks appropriate".

Clause 13 referred for further consideration.

Clause 14 (The Regional Support Services Organisation)

The Acting Chairperson: Members were content with clause 14 and its related schedule, apart from the name of the proposed body, which the Committee wants to call the "regional business services organisation". The Department's response is that it would consider a change in the name of the organisation to the "regional business support organisation".

The Committee Clerk: The current name used in the Bill is the "regional support services organisation"; the suggestion from the Committee was "regional business services organisation".

Mr Mitchell: The Department accepts that suggestion.

The Committee Clerk: I am sorry, your letter of response states that the Department will accept the name "regional business support organisation"?

Mr Mitchell: That is a typo. It should read "regional business services organisation".

The Acting Chairperson: So we were right.

Mr Mitchell: You were right, and we were wrong.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 14, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 15 (Functions of RSSO)

The Acting Chairperson: The wording of clause 15(3)(a) was mentioned last week. It relates to the inclusion of the word "equitable" alongside "economic, efficient and effective".

Clause 15 referred for further consideration.

Clause 16 agreed to.

Clause 17 (Functions of the Patient and Client Council)

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members highlighted the concerns raised by Disability Action relating to the clause.

Clause 17 referred for further consideration.

Clause 18 (Duty to co-operate with the Patient and Client Council)

The Acting Chairperson: The officials agreed to consider the recommendations, and they have accepted our suggestion to change “have regard to” to “have due regard to”.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 18, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 19 (Public involvement and consultation)

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members were content with the clause as presently drafted apart from a question in relation to clause 19(1)(a) about the provision of information. The Department has agreed to reject it, so we will defer it.

Clause 19 referred for further consideration.

Clause 20 (Public involvement: consultation schemes)

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members were content with the clause as presently drafted. Have officials given any consideration to the change in wording from “have regard to” to “have due regard to”?

Mr McMaster: When we were going through the Bill, the change in wording was not mentioned. However, for consistency, we feel that the words “to have regard” in clause 20(3)(a) should be changed to read “to have due regard”.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 20, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 21 (Duty on HSC trusts in relation to improvement of health and social well-being)

The Acting Chairperson: The Department has agreed to accept our recommendations.

Mr Gallagher: What were our recommendations?

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members had suggested the inclusion of a reference to reducing health inequalities, and officials agreed to consider that further. A suggestion has been made to include “and reducing health inequalities” after the words “health and social well-being”.

Mr Gallagher: It is the trusts’ duty to consult with the people for whom they provide the services. Is that included?

Mr McMaster: In common with the organisations that we are creating under the legislation, the trusts will have an obligation to complete a consultation scheme that will show how they will consult with the people for whom they provide the services. They are required to submit a scheme to the Department in nine months; we will scrutinise and approve that scheme if it is suitable.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 21, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 22 (Public-private partnerships)

The Acting Chairperson: During previous discussions, members expressed concern about the principle of public-private partnerships.

Mrs Hanna: In clause 22, is it possible to include appropriate wording to reflect some members’ concerns generally about PFIs, and not just in cases into which public-private partnership is to be entered? I accept the Department’s formal response to the Committee’s suggestion, but is it possible to include appropriate wording to reflect some members’ general concerns about PFIs?

The Acting Chairperson: If members still have concerns about that issue, we will refer the clause.

Mr McMaster: Do you want that to be included in the legislation?

Mrs Hanna: Is that possible? I understand that it might not be, because it is a principle.

The Acting Chairperson: Will the Department examine whether that is possible?

Mrs Hanna: We can refer that clause until the next time.

Clause 22 referred for further consideration.

Clause 23 (Schemes for the transfer of assets and liabilities)

Mr McMaster: When we re-examined schedule 5, we discovered that an explanation was missing. Schedule 5 provides the details of schemes whereby staff are transferred. It also lists the three types of bodies that should not be present at any hearing of resolution of disputes.

When schedule 5 was initially drafted, we thought that we did not need to include the transferor body — the body from which employees are transferred — because we considered that those bodies would be done away with on day one. However, employees may be transferred after that date. Therefore, we will include the appropriate wording in schedule 5 to ensure that a body from which employees are transferred is not involved in any dispute resolution. That will bring the Bill into line with the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 23 agreed to.

Clauses 24 to 28 agreed to.

Clause 29 (Orders, regulations, guidance and directions)

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee has received further information from the Examiner of Statutory Rules since the Department's paper. Therefore, I suggest that we refer clause 29.

Clause 29 referred for further consideration.

Clauses 30 and 31 agreed to.

Clause 32 (Minor and consequential amendments)

The Acting Chairperson: Officials have explained that some technical changes must be made to schedule 6.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 32 agreed to.

Clauses 33 to 35 agreed to.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

Schedule 4 agreed to.

Schedule 5 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 6 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 7 agreed to.

The Acting Chairperson: I would love to say that that concludes the Bill's formal clause-by-clause scrutiny; however, it does not, because several clauses have been referred for further consideration. Nevertheless, thank you for your patience, and we shall return to those matters at the next meeting.

Mr Mitchell: Would it be helpful if the Department drew up a paper for the next meeting, outlining any referred matters and changes that were suggested during this discussion?

The Acting Chairperson: Yes, that would be helpful.

Mrs McGill: Will members receive that paper in advance of the next Committee meeting?

Mr Mitchell: You will. The turnaround time did not permit earlier submission on this occasion.

The Acting Chairperson: We will be in recess for a week.

Mr Mitchell: Do you require any further information on, for example, agency matters? Should we bring any additional material?

The Acting Chairperson: No, but we will get in touch with you if we require anything further. Thank you for attending today.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

6 November 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 Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Donald Armstrong	}	Department of the Environment
Mr John Brogan		
Mr Simon Kirk		
Mrs Gillian McIntyre		

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): Present today are Donald Armstrong, John Brogan and Gillian McIntyre from the Department of the Environment. I ask them to join us at the table. There are about 10 minutes before we must suspend proceedings for the Remembrance service. That should allow enough time for an overview.

Mr Donald Armstrong (Department of the Environment): I suggest that we handle the discussion by, first, examining some of the papers that were provided to the Committee: the planning paper, the parking paper, and the paper on in-scope and out-of-scope vehicles. Afterwards, we can move to the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill and deal with issues as they arise. I am conscious of what Mr Ford said about general issues. Simon Kirk is here to observe the discussion with regard to planning issues. It seems prudent that rather than have Simon return to the meeting after it is suspended, we deal with

planning matters first. Therefore, the paper that you were sent on planning —

The Chairperson: So, you expect the planning issue to be sorted out in 10 minutes, Donald?

Mr D Armstrong: Well, we can try.

The Chairperson: Simon, I invite you to come forward and sit at the table.

Mr D Armstrong: I want to make a comment about planning. At our previous meeting, there was confusion about what the term “operating centre” means. We have considered the matter, and because it will be difficult to change the term from “operating centre”, it appears that we are stuck with it. However, we can redefine “operating centre” so that it is abundantly clear to people what the term means. Therefore, an operating centre would be a place from which a vehicle works and is kept overnight, or simply where a vehicle is kept overnight. An operating centre can, therefore, be a depot where vehicles come in and out and are kept. Equally, an operating centre can be a place where a vehicle is parked off-road and where nothing else happens, for example, at someone’s house. We must keep in mind that an operating centre can be either of those places, which are distinctly different in character. That affects how planning is dealt with.

The Chairperson: I know that Mr Clarke will want to comment on that issue. I have considered that definition, and although it is a bit more expansive than the previous definition, I do not believe that it deals with the planning issue. In essence, the place from which a vehicle works can be instantly equated to a business, which brings us back to the definition of “operating”, and the definition of “operate” is “work”. I am, therefore, a wee bit concerned. Although you have clarified the term for the Department, in doing so it may make the term more expansive and, therefore, more difficult to define for planning purposes.

Mr D Armstrong: I hope not.

Mr Simon Kirk (Department of the Environment): I do not think so, to be honest. We clarified our position, which, in summary, is that there are no operational planning issues about drivers who simply park their vehicles at their properties overnight. Although a number of my colleagues in the enforcement sections have cases in relation to unauthorised haulage depots, none has cases in relation to single vehicles, and none of them expects any enforcement action.

The Chairperson: Are there any cases concerning multiple vehicles?

Mr Kirk: Although I have no details, a number of cases involve the investigation of unauthorised haulage depots from which more than one vehicle operates and in which more is going on than drivers simply parking their vehicles at their properties at night.

Mr T Clarke: We are as clear now as we were a few weeks ago. It is as black as closing one's eyes. My experience of the Planning Service is that unless it is in black and white for everybody to understand, the woolly conversation that we have just had is as useless as a lot of the other conversations that we had with the Planning Service in the past. I am not content with that description. At its last meeting, the Committee asked for a paper from the Planning Service to outline the position exactly.

The Chairperson: We received a response, but it raises further issues.

Mr Beggs: There are existing Planning Service regulations that clarify where businesses can operate. What, if anything, does this proposal change about the single-owner operator?

Mr Kirk: From a planning point of view, it does not change anything. People parked commercial vehicles overnight at their properties before this Bill existed. Enforcement action has not been taken against a single vehicle being parked. We may have taken enforcement action against unauthorised haulage depots that operate more than one vehicle —

The Chairperson: Can a haulage depot be defined as a location that operates more than one vehicle? Does a single location that operates two vehicles qualify as a depot?

Mr Kirk: It becomes less clear cut, because the specific nature of the site would have to be considered. I presume that a number of cases involve owner-drivers who operate from rural locations. If a part-time farmer has a part-time haulage business, he might be able to park two vehicles inside a large farm complex without a material change of use taking place. However, in a residential area, it is unlikely that somebody would be able to park two vehicles within their curtilage without, for example, hard-coring part of the garden or changing the use of part of the site.

The Chairperson: I am sure that everyone in this room can think of a family enterprise in which a father and a couple of his sons are engaged. If that involves more than one vehicle, we know what that means, and that gives me cause for concern.

Mr Beggs: I presume that that is a relevant issue before any new legislation is implemented. The discussion is, therefore, about the effectiveness of existing regulations rather than what is being discussed in this Bill. Is that correct?

Mr Kirk: That is correct.

Mr T Clarke: Are we saying that people who are already involved in such operations are fine, but anyone who wants to start a new operation cannot?

The Chairperson: He is not saying that. The issue concerns those operations that have not been drawn to the attention of the Planning Service.

Mr Boylan: We are still faffing about with the issue. The issue is whether a business is operating from home, whether Planning Service perceives that, and whether a van or other vehicle is used. That is where clarification is needed. The Department is making the mistake of thinking that someone is just getting into a vehicle and driving to work. There could be a perception that someone is operating a business from home — for which planning permission is required.

Mr Kirk: Planning permission is not always needed in order to operate a business from home.

Mr Boylan: That is why the Committee needs clarification on this matter, so that Planning Service will not misconstrue the issue. The question is whether a business is being operated from home, and, in rural areas, that does not happen; it is not allowed. Existing business are established, but any new businesses — and there will be a lot of them — will need licences.

Mr Kirk: The key issue in Planning Service is whether there is a material change of use if a business is being run from home. If there is no material change of use then no development has taken place and, therefore, planning permission is not required. That is set out in the report. When trying to assess whether someone is running a business from home, the Department will find out whether planning permission is needed in order to run that business from home.

The Chairperson: Yes. Those are the questions.

Mr Boylan: The fact that they will require a licence under which to operate.

Mr Kirk: That is a separate consent. There are a whole range of consents; for example, one might require planning permission or building control. A licence may be required under one statutory regime, but that does not necessarily mean that planning permission will have to be applied for automatically.

The Chairperson: We know that; we all come from areas where such situations exist. However, the issue is whether an operator's licence will directly result in a read-across to Planning Service. You have already drawn us into the territory into which we knew that we would probably be drawn. One single vehicle operating from an operating centre is not really a problem. However, problems emerge once it goes beyond one vehicle when, potentially, operators could face the situation of enforcement and such issues that cross our desks every day. That is the issue.

Mr Armstrong: Planning rules for land use already exist and thousands of people are already complying. The legislation that we are bringing in should not make any material difference to that process.

The Chairperson: I beg to differ. The Department will have formally designated operating centres. There is, potentially, a read-across of names and addresses to DOE Planning Service for formal designation — and I would be surprised if there were not. That draws us into other issues and difficulties that some members would potentially see as being a problem in rural areas.

Mr Armstrong: Is Planning Service's contention not that its decisions on land use are made irrespective of what designation is on the land? The fact that there is none on it now, and that there will be one on it in the future, does not make any difference as to how it designates the land.

The Chairperson: No.

Mr Armstrong: Are you looking for Planning Service to say simply that because a place is designated, an operating centre will not, in itself, make any change in relation to planning?

The Chairperson: No.

Mr Weir: Leaving aside the operators, all of us will, at some stage, have had various complaints from constituents about so-and-so operating a business from home or whatever, and for which they clearly do not have planning permission. Will there not be confusion when Planning Service points out that it is perfectly OK for so-and-so to operate, when the person who is complaining says that that person has an operating centre, so how does that not constitute a business that needs planning permission? That person will also be able to point out that someone else has an operating centre — albeit in different circumstances — that requires planning permission. The situation will, potentially, cause a lot of confusion for operators and for those who complain. People will have difficulty explaining the difference.

The Chairperson: I knew that this issue would take us into another area, and it is one that we will have to revisit.

I am aware of the fact that members will be leaving the meeting at 10.35 am to attend the service. A break of three quarters of an hour will allow people to concentrate their minds, as that issue will prove to be quite a sticking point. The Committee will reconvene at 11.30 am.

Committee suspended.

On resuming —

The Chairperson: I almost said that we should start where we finished; however, we were not finished. We shall return to the issue that was being discussed. Have you had a chance to give it any further thought?

Mr D Armstrong: Yes, for an entire hour.

The Chairperson: Have you come to any definite conclusions?

Mr D Armstrong: The issue that you want to resolve is whether designating a place as an operating centre will have a planning impact, or is a planning concern. Simon can respond to that factual query. The designation of operating centre is already in place for the hire-for-reward sector in Northern Ireland, and has been for many years. As Simon mentioned earlier, it has not had any impact on planning. It is already established and working in legislation. Therefore, in fact, the proposal is not new; it is simply an extension of that definition to the own-account sector. The current definition is in place and works well. We propose that we explain more clearly the definition of an operating centre. Simon can comment on that point in order to satisfy the Committee on the designation's impact on planning.

Mr Kirk: Perhaps, if you seek specific details, we should provide a written answer. Are you saying that because premises are designated as an operating centre, you feel that, automatically, we will take enforcement action?

The Chairperson: It is not that that will happen automatically, but that there would be read-across that could have implications or consequences for planning, albeit not in every case. You touched upon that when you mentioned moving from single to multiple vehicles, which would flag up issues with Planning Service straight away. I read your letter and considered the circumstances to which it refers. It outlines questions, rather than potential solutions. I understand that every individual case must be considered on its merits or demerits. Our concern is that a form of read-across exists.

Mr Kirk: If someone did something that was unauthorised or about which we had concern, it would not matter whether that person had an operating licence. We would still investigate the matter. Every year, we receive many thousands of complaints that must be investigated. Therefore, if someone did something that was potentially unlawful under planning legislation, we would investigate the matter, regardless of what is contained in the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill.

Mr T Clarke: When Donald defined an operating centre earlier, he used the words "working from". Many people "work from" premises, but it is not

defined as an operating centre. At the minute, they are only parking at the residence. However, once that building is defined as an operating centre, they would be deemed to be working from it. The Planning Service may want to look at some drivers who park at their homes, but, at the moment, there is very little that it can do. However, once we use Donald's term "working from" and define the premises as an operating centre, it becomes, in effect, a place of business. I have serious concerns about that.

Mr D Armstrong: Let me clarify the matter: my suggestion was that we amend the definition of operating centre to mean the base or centre from which a vehicle normally operates and/or is normally parked when not in use. Therefore, it would not necessarily mean that the vehicle is operating from the premises — it may be operating from there, or it may simply be parked there when not in use.

The Chairperson: Did you say "and/or"?

Mr D Armstrong: Yes. The vehicle is operating from the centre and it is parking there, or it is just parking there. So, there are two meanings within that one definition.

Mr T Clarke: That makes it worse.

Mr D Armstrong: It should not make it worse in the sense that it is an operating centre, and a person can park there but not be working from it. Would the Committee be satisfied if the Planning Service were to say that because a place is designated as an operating centre, that in itself would have no planning impact, nor would it influence planning as regards land use?

Mr Weir: I am trying to bridge the gap. I appreciate your comment about what the Planning Service could say, but what is to stop wording of that nature, however it is phrased, on the face of the Bill?

Mr D Armstrong: As far as planning is concerned?

Mr Weir: Whatever way you want to phrase it, a line could be included in the Bill to say that that the granting of an operator's licence will not have any implication for the Planning Service.

Mr D Armstrong: I am not sure that we could do that within the competence of a goods licensing Bill.

Mr Weir: I do not know whether there is a form of words that could be used. Given some of the concerns that have been raised about this issue, I do not believe that people would feel that a letter of comfort — for want of a better expression — from the Planning Service would be sufficient. Something much more explicit is needed.

The Chairperson: We will have to park the issue. We will not resolve the planning matter today. Could the Department try to find a more satisfactory form of

wording that would resolve the problem? My feeling is that we will not get past the matter today.

Mr Weir: Whatever the solution, it must be legislative. With the best will in the world, the head of the Planning Service can say such and such, but in a year's time somebody different could be in charge and could decide that the service no longer holds that view. Therefore a statement from the Planning Service does not carry much weight or offer much reassurance in this case. Whatever is done by whatever formula must be reflected in an amendment to the Bill. There should be some written assurance on the matter.

Mr Ford: It would be ideal if the matter could be dealt with in the Bill. Given the nature of the Bill, I can see where problems might arise, but the Minister should make the matter explicit in a statement when introducing the Bill. As I understand it, statements that are made in the Assembly when legislation is being considered have more force than a circular from the Planning Service. That might be a solution to the problem.

Mr Beggs: I support that idea. It would be particularly pertinent, given that the Minister has responsibility for planning as well as road safety and vehicles.

The Chairperson: It would be helpful if, between yourselves, you could come back to the Committee with some sort of resolution to the problem, or options for a resolution. Simon, I know that you have to leave now; thank you for attending.

Let us move on to the document on general issues, unless there is anything else?

Mr D Armstrong: We were to deal with two further papers before that: the first on the parking issue and the second on vehicles that are out of scope or in scope of the legislation.

The second paper aims to give the Committee an idea of which vehicles are covered by the legislation and which are not. There are several issues to consider, such as what is the gross weight of a vehicle that has an unladen plated weight, and so forth. We examined the Bill, which matches the current legislation in GB and contains the guidance principles currently used in Northern Ireland for the hire-for-reward sector.

Any vehicle weighing over than 3.5 tons is in scope of the legislation. When a trailer is attached to a vehicle, it becomes a combination. If that trailer's unladen weight is under 1020 kgs, that weight does not count towards the overall weight of the combination. Therefore, a trailer of up to 3.5 tonnes could pull a trailer that has an unladen weight of under 1020 kgs. If that is not the case, the combined weight of trailer and vehicle come into the scope of the legislation. On that basis, we provided for the Committee a series of photographs of vehicles that are either in scope

or out of scope to give members an idea of what the legislation covers.

However, it is complex, as members will probably agree. We have been trying to simplify that, and one of the amendments that we are considering would facilitate much simpler regulation. To put something simpler on the face of the Bill would be a huge risk. Therefore, we propose to amend the Bill by removing schedule 1 and replacing it with something much simpler.

Another issue that has arisen is that the current GB legislation does not comply with EU directives on trailers under 1020 kgs. I spoke with officials in GB yesterday, and they propose to amend that legislation, but not until further EU regulations have been introduced. It would probably not be prudent for us to go ahead, knowing that a change is due and that the figure of 1020 kgs is not up to EU standards for the hire-for-reward sector.

Mr Beggs: You said that you are not satisfied with the current definition of a small goods vehicle, but you said that the effect of changing it might be that a considerable number of additional vehicles that do not come under the legislation in other parts of Great Britain would do so here.

Mr D Armstrong: That is currently the case here.

Mr Beggs: You seem to be dissatisfied with the fact that, according to the GB definition, many escape the legislation and that has led you to propose amendment No 1 in the provided document. Is that correct?

Mr D Armstrong: The legislation is very woolly, and it is difficult to interpret it on the roadside. One has to run to check whether a trailer is plated or unplated and whether the weight on any plate is a laden weight or a gross weight. There is much complexity involved.

Mr Beggs: You stated that a considerable number of vehicles will be out of scope of the GB definition. Is Northern Ireland, therefore, to be used as a guinea pig for adjusting that definition? The regulations must be widened, but there is a danger of widening the net too far and creating too much bureaucracy. There is a balance to everything, so I am trying to gather further information on how much wider this proposed amendment is compared with the legislation in England.

Mr D Armstrong: We want to ensure that people are clear on whether they are in scope or out of scope. At present in Northern Ireland, it does not matter whether the combination is under 1020kgs. Any combination over 3.5 tons is in scope, and that is much more restrictive. However, enforcement officers have been applying that standard because the other one is so restrictive. We must consider something that enables us to allow the small cars that pull trailers, and so

forth, to be out of scope, because we do not want everyone to be caught up in the legislation.

The Chairperson: That would be very difficult. How can the weight of a vehicle, travelling on a road with a trailer behind it, be determined? That vehicle would have to be stopped and weighed, and that is unrealistic.

Mr D Armstrong: It is a very difficult and unwieldy thing to handle. Currently, the GB standard is being used, even though it does not apply here. Therefore, the Department wants to introduce a simpler mechanism.

Mr Beggs: If I am reading this correctly, the Department is proposing to remove it from schedule 1 in order to create greater flexibility. Do you propose that any subsequent amendments or changes to that definition be enacted through affirmative resolution? I am conscious that greater flexibility gives more power to the Department, and I feel that it should be subject to affirmative rather than negative resolution.

Mr D Armstrong: I have no problem with it being affirmative. That is not a big issue for the Department. The issue is that if it remains in the schedule, when the Bill is subsequently passed, it will tie us down.

The Department needs more time to examine what is the best solution for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, we need to examine what Europe requires in relation to the hire-for-reward sector, and then apply that. The Department's view is that it is inappropriate for it to remain in its present form in schedule 1. We require more time to work on it. It is possible to understand what that is saying, who it includes and who it excludes, but it is very hard to work with. Indeed, we have been working with it for a number of years, and it is still hard to grapple with. We need to simplify it a lot.

Mr Weir: In relation to the European changes, presumably you will have a rough idea of those changes even if you do not know their precise nature. Perhaps that provides another argument for ensuring that there is some flexibility, so that when those changes are made that they can be more easily incorporated into the legislation.

Mr D Armstrong: The provision currently contravenes a European directive. That is one change that should be made. Furthermore, Europe is currently introducing a regulation that will tighten things up in this area, and it hopes, through that EU regulation, to remove a vast number of exemptions from the hire-for-reward sector. We must see what is to be introduced and, as you say, move on and allow ourselves the flexibility to respond to that.

Mr T Clarke: Clause 1 states that if a vehicle is used for hire or reward in connection with a trade or business an operator's licence may be required. I am

aware that the whole idea of this is road safety, but are you saying that it is unsafe for vehicles that are 3·5 tons or more?

Mr D Armstrong: No. I was not making a road-safety comment. In fact, I have not made a pro or —

Mr T Clarke: I thought that it was the nature of the whole —

Mrs Gillian McIntyre (Department of the Environment): Why is it set at that threshold?

Mr D Armstrong: Why is the 3·5 ton threshold set?

Mr T Clarke: No. Are you saying those vehicles that are 3·5 tons and above have more serious implications for road safety?

Mr D Armstrong: No, I was not saying that. The 3·5 ton threshold is set in different ways. That threshold applies to tachographs and other legislation relating to the carrying of goods, and 3·5 tons is the appropriate weight at which to set it.

Mr T Clarke: Transit vans do not have tachographs.

Mr D Armstrong: Those under 3·5 tons do not.

Mr T Clarke: Or those at 3·5 tons.

Mr D Armstrong: A 3·5 tons transit van does not require a tachograph. However, vehicles over 3·5 tons do require one.

Mr T Clarke: My problem is that I do not believe that this is being introduced for the right reasons; I think that the Department is trying to catch all those smaller vehicles, for the wrong reasons. By doing so, it is leaving a complete industry that does not have to be licensed. Therefore, are we saying that it is safe if you are not doing it for hire and reward, but unsafe if you are?

Mr D Armstrong: The EU legislation deals only with the hire-for-reward sector; it does not deal with the own-account sector. However, it is a fact that heavier goods vehicles have a worse safety record than other vehicles.

The letter of 24 October 2008 is a response to the question about parking goods vehicles in residential areas. There is no legislation about parking goods vehicles that is specific to residential areas. In the letter, we set out what we could find in relation to parking goods vehicles and other vehicles on the road, including parking at night.

Under the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, it is an offence — with certain exceptions — to park a heavy goods vehicle on a road verge, a central reserve or a footway. A heavy goods vehicle is defined as one that is over 7·5 tons. There is no general offence that prevents non-heavy goods vehicles from parking on footways, except where there are clearways.

Over and above all of that, as far as parking on the road is concerned, it is an offence to cause a vehicle to wait on a public road, except in a lay-by or a designated parking area within 15m of its junction with any other road. Unfortunately, I once came foul of that law — I did not realise that it is an offence to park within 15m of a road junction.

The Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 state that a vehicle's lights must be on if the vehicle is parked on a road between sunset and sunrise — the exception for goods vehicles is if the vehicle is parked in an area in which the speed limit is 30 mph or less. Those are all of the roadside-parking restrictions that we found.

The Chairperson: We now move to the overview document. The cover letter is dated 31 October 2008. There are a few issues, some of which we touched on earlier. Mr Ford and Mr Trevor Clarke raised issues, and I also have a few. Let us deal with paragraphs G1 to G4 in the table of general issues raised in relation to the Bill.

The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) raised the issue about extra-regulatory impact. That is covered in G1, which states:

"The use of agricultural vehicles will be examined in the context of determining vehicles or functions that will be exempt from the requirements".

I realise that this issue will come up later, but at what point will we have the list of vehicles that are exempt and, more importantly, the activities from which they are exempted?

Mr D Armstrong: We have already started work with various stakeholders, including the UFU, to identify cases or justifications for exemptions. They will obviously have to be provided before the regulation stage is reached, because the Bill only provides the power to exempt. Currently, we do not have a timetable for producing proposals that detail what will be exempt and what will not. Obviously, that must be done before the regulation stage is reached, but we do not have a timetable. It is one of the things that we have already started work on.

The Chairperson: That is important. Members recognised that that is a major issue.

Mr D Armstrong: I accept that, Chairman.

The Chairperson: G2 states that: "Road freight licensing is not a tax measure".

Where did that come from?

Mr D Armstrong: It came from a point that was made by some people who attended the briefing sessions. They said that road-freight licensing was just a way for the Government to drag in more stealth taxes. The phrase "stealth tax" was used at a number of

those briefing sessions. Regulation and tax are two different things. Road-freight licensing is not a tax because no revenue goes to the Government. All the moneys that are lifted through fees are used in the administration of regulation, because the administration and the cost must balance out.

The Chairperson: We knew that it would not be, because it cannot be.

Mr D Armstrong: That was where it was raised by people who asked whether this was a stealth tax by Gordon Brown.

The Chairperson: Does any member have an issue with page 4 of the summary of general issues? If not, are there any issues related to page 5? If not, we move to page 6. Do members have any issues in respect of page 6?

Mr Ford: Yes, I have issues in relation to G15 and G16 on page 6. I am fairly sure that the Department's representatives heard me say a fortnight ago that the Committee expected to hear from the Department on the issue of a traffic commissioner. I am upset that the Committee has heard nothing other than a fairly dismissive response that fails to address widespread concern in the Committee, particularly since we heard from Mrs Bell. I want to hear a bit more detail from Donald or whoever as to what the Department's current position is, particularly as they no doubt listened intently to what the Committee said on previous occasions.

Mr John Brogan (Department of the Environment): I was not aware that the Department was expected to respond in writing.

Mr Ford: I will happily accept a verbal response.

Mr Brogan: If the Department receives a request, it will respond in writing within a few days. However, I will try to answer the concerns.

The Bill itself is exclusively a licensing Bill that contains all the powers that a traffic commissioner in GB would exercise. The appointment of a traffic commissioner conventionally lies in a separate, dedicated legislation. The Department is considering the possible impact of the appointment of a traffic commissioner in order to deal with not only the licensing of goods vehicles but with taxis and bus operators. It remains to be seen whether those deliberations will lead to a separate piece of legislation on the appointment of a traffic commissioner.

The Department considers that it would be inappropriate to legislate for the appointment, the constitution and other requirements for the post of a traffic commissioner within the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill.

Mr Ford: Will John explain why he uses the term "inappropriate"? Is he saying legally inappropriate, or

departmentally and conveniently inappropriate? Bear in mind that the long title of the Bill is:

"A Bill to make provision concerning the licensing of operators of certain goods vehicles."

Therefore, a traffic commissioner is entirely within the competence of the Bill. A traffic commissioner might have a role in relation to buses, taxis and other operators, but the key problem is goods vehicles, and that is the area in which the traffic commissioner is most needed.

The Chairperson: As a follow-up to Mr Ford's question, has the Department been given particular direction on the issue of a traffic commissioner?

Mr D Armstrong: Before the Bill was drafted, the Department had set in train a programme to investigate how to manage the operator licensing of taxis, buses and freight. An independent traffic commissioner is only one option that might be considered. It may well be that the course proposed in this Bill is appropriate. Therefore, without prejudicing the outcome, the Department considers the role of an independent traffic commissioner as just one possible consideration. We have not progressed that far.

The concentration has been on getting this Bill completed. The Taxis Bill is finished, and we are working on bus regulation in conjunction with the Department for Regional Development. In terms of competing for resources, the traffic commissioner is a programme of work that has not progressed that far. There was not a pressure on the Department to appoint a traffic commissioner. The Department removed the measure from this Bill in order to move the Bill forward, after which all the issues will be considered in the round. It may be — and we will come back to the Committee on this — that an independent traffic commissioner is not the best way forward for Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Department cannot presume to put that measure in the Bill.

Mr Beggs: Should the Department come to the conclusion that a commissioner is the way forward, will the Bill have to be amended? Is there sufficient flexibility, in your opinion, to enable that to happen without having to re-legislate?

Mr Brogan: The Department consulted the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) at the outset of the drafting of the Bill. As far as I know, the Bill could simply be amended to the effect that any reference to "the Department" is changed to "traffic commissioner". The Bill gives traffic commissioners the necessary powers to deal with operator licensing.

Mr D Armstrong: During the drafting of the Bill, the Department suggested the inclusion of a clause that would apply if a traffic commissioner were appointed. However, it was recommended that we omit that.

Mr Boylan: I have concerns about independent challenges to operators and how the Department will implement the legislation. Donald mentioned the possibility of examining that issue in case there is ever an independent challenge. I am concerned that the Department is regulating all of this; there must be scope for another body — which may or may not be a traffic commissioner — to handle some of the regulation. That matter must be considered.

Mr D Armstrong: The Department's biggest concern was that those in charge of the enforcement and prosecution would be too close to those taking the decisions. As I outlined at the previous meeting, the Bill offers two options. The agency, in its current form, can deal with that entire area or we can separate those functions. If we do the latter and it is subsequently decided that an independent traffic commissioner is the best option, it will be much easier to transfer. However, if the agency assumes sole responsibility now, the administrative transfer will be much larger. Although the Department and the agency are, in a sense, legally one entity, there is some separation. We would prefer to separate the Department and the agency's roles.

Mr Boylan: During your discussions with operators, did they raise concerns about the need for an independent challenge? I am concerned that the same people are implementing, operating and legislating.

Mr D Armstrong: The agency will be responsible for enforcing legislation on the ground. The Department — rather than the agency — will make decisions about the traffic commissioner. During the briefing and consultation process, much of the industry was happy with the Driver and Vehicle Agency, subject to that body having more resources for enforcement. The general tenor was that the roles should be separated; there was not so much emphasis placed on independence. However, the Bill outlines the provision for appeals to the upper tribunal, which is a distinct UK-wide body that reviews the decisions of traffic commissioners and will review the Department's decisions. We hope that the Department's structure allows for management of the regulation to be separate from the agency.

Mr Ford: John and Donald have made reasonable responses that suggest the legislation could be amended relatively easily. However, the blunt reality is that the timescale for getting legislation, especially new legislation, through any legislature can be extremely extended.

Mr Gallagher: Especially if we do not have one.

Mr Ford: I was going to resist making cheap points about the lack of a functioning Executive.

Can Donald tell me what the current timescale is for consultation on the possibility of appointing a traffic commissioner? Can you consult your crystal ball and

tell me that if the consultation process concluded that a traffic commissioner was a good idea, how long would it take to legislate for that?

Mr D Armstrong: Given that we are examining resources, that is a tough question.

Mr Ford: At least I was smiling when I asked.

Mr D Armstrong: It has taken two or three years to reach this stage with this Bill. Therefore, it will take another two to three years to introduce more primary legislation. A fair bit of work must be done to examine the possibilities and options.

Mr Ford: Although the departmental team is constrained by a number of factors in what it can say here, the Committee could take an entirely other view, namely that doing something about a traffic commissioner is sufficiently important that it should be done now, rather than wait for a minimum — and I think that you are an optimist — of three years.

Mr D Armstrong: The Department would be very happy to hear such a recommendation from the Committee.

The Chairperson: David, are you formalising that into a proposal?

Mr Ford: It remains my belief, based on evidence given to the Committee, that a traffic commissioner could exercise positive functions, starting with the freight industry and, potentially, adding buses and taxis later. That is within the scope of this Bill, and the Committee should consider its own amendments to that effect; even if officials — who are being as helpful as they can — are unable to agree with us this morning.

The Chairperson: Mr Beggs and Mr Ross wish to comment. Is your point about this issue, Roy, because Alastair has indicated that his point is?

Mr Beggs: My point is not about this issue — it is slightly ajar from it.

The Chairperson: I want to tease out this matter first of all, if that is ok, so I will take Alastair's point first.

Mr Ross: We need to be cautious about going down this route. Beverly Bell, Traffic Commissioner for the north western traffic area, was impressive when she gave evidence to the Committee on 9 October, 2008. However, for years we have said that we want devolution in order that we could take control of matters and have power in local hands. Some people now seem to want to give that power away to quangos and independent commissioners. We need to be cautious, and ask whether we really want to do that.

At least if the Department retains control, it is more accountable to the Committee and the Minister. We need to be very cautious about moving to a stage where we want suddenly to give power away to independent bodies or quangos, whether on

environmental governance or the issue of a traffic commissioner.

Mr Gallagher: That is especially true if four or five traffic commissioners are needed.

Mr Boylan: I certainly agree with what Mr Ross said.

The Chairperson: Mr Beggs indicated that he wanted to speak. I am getting conflicting messages.

Mr Boylan: My point is about the same issue. I have no objection to what Mr Ross is saying, but there must be an independent body within the Department in order to ensure that the operators have an opportunity to challenge decisions. I am not saying that, down the road, a traffic commissioner is the person to do that job; I am just saying that operators must have the opportunity to challenge if necessary. Donald alluded to such a body, and there is scope there for consideration. However, I am not advocating a traffic commissioner.

Mr Beggs: I could say something about a traffic commissioner but I do not know enough about the subject. Detailed work needs to be done on the matter. However, with regard to the legislation before us: will the Department not need extra time in order to amend the primary legislation when that separate piece of work is completed?

Mr Brogan: The inclusion of even a reference to a traffic commissioner would require the Bill to define the commissioner. If a commissioner does not exist, the role cannot be defined.

The Chairperson: The Committee needs more information and detail about the rolling function of a traffic commissioner and any process that would be needed if it were to be incorporated into the legislation.

Mr Ford: I wanted to try to be helpful by avoiding discussing this matter. In fairness – and following from what the Chairperson said – if the Committee did not give formal notice that it wanted a formal response last time, the Department's response here refers to the consultation. If we had papers that provided the full detail of that consultation, which could be considered alongside the evidence that we received from Mrs Bell, the Committee would be in the position to consider that in detail.

The Chairperson: And better informed, anyway.

Mr Ford: Perhaps somewhere between Alastair Ross's view and mine, the Committee could decide whether a traffic commissioner is appropriate.

The Chairperson: If we may move to page 7 of the general issues document.

Mr Beggs: Issue G21 states that bringing all vehicles over 3·5 tonnes into the system would lead to a more equitable cost base for licensing because, at present, only the "hire and reward" sector pays. I

would like further information about the second sentence of G21, which states:

"As this accounts for about 20% of the vehicles, the economies of scale of bringing the other 80% into the scope would ensure a fairer distribution of the costs."

What accounts for that 20%?

Mr D Armstrong: If one looks at the size of the industry in Northern Ireland, 20% of that industry is in the for-hire-or-reward sector. The other 80% accounts for the percentage of unlicensed vehicles in the industry.

Mr Beggs: Thank you.

The Chairperson: The Committee will now consider, page by page, the key issues that were raised about various clauses in the Bill. Do you want to say anything by way of introduction before we begin, John?

Mr Brogan: Perhaps I should outline what clause 1 is designed to do, after which we will examine the issues. Clause 1 is fundamental to the Bill because it establishes the general need to hold an operator's licence. The clause will require the for-hire-or-reward and own-account sectors to hold licences. Clause 1(2) sets out circumstances in which a licence will not be needed. In effect, Clause 1(2) details those vehicles that are exempt from the requirement to hold an operator's licence.

Clause 1(2)(a) is the subject of our first proposed amendment, and deals with the use of small goods vehicles, which are, essentially, those with a plated weight below 3·5 tonnes. In its present form, clause 1(2)(a) refers to the use of a small goods vehicle within the meaning given in schedule 1. As was said earlier, however, we were proposing to drop schedule 1 in favour of an amendment, and insert a new subsection (2)(a) to provide the Department with the power to prescribe those combinations of articulated vehicles that are out of scope of the Bill. That was done in relation to the DALO letter prescribing the photographs.

Mr Beggs: In defining the type of vehicles that may lie within or beyond the scope of the Bill, will you take into consideration timing issues? People with vehicles that they are currently using may need time in order to ensure that they comply with any legislation. Therefore, time may be required to allow for precise boundaries to be defined and adjustments to be made.

Mr Brogan: That is a good point and one that we have considered. The Department wants to adopt as pragmatic an approach as possible to the introduction of the new licensing scheme. Clause 57 of the Bill deals with transition arrangements for the introduction of the new licensing system. It is only fair that the Department examines the issue that Mr Beggs raised, so that we can adopt a pragmatic approach. That will

avoid a big bang-type scenario when the legislation comes into effect on a Monday morning.

Mr Beggs: Thank you.

Mr Brogan: Other exemptions include clause 1(2) (d) which refers to the use of a vehicle of any class specified in regulations. I believe that there was an issue with regard to negative and affirmative resolution of that matter. At this point, perhaps it is appropriate to talk generally about the affirmative and negative resolution issue, which appears in another DALO response.

The Chairperson: Please continue, Mr Brogan. Members may raise any queries about clause 1 after you have finished.

Mr Brogan: Since our last meeting, we took further legal advice on the issue of certain regulation-making powers. That advice is on the first page of the most recent letter to the Committee clerk.

The Chairperson: Is that the letter that was tabled today for members' information?

Mr Brogan: Yes.

The Chairperson: It is dated yesterday, 5 November, 2008. To which paragraph are you referring?

Mr Brogan: Paragraph 3, under the heading "background". The advice was to the effect that there is often no right and wrong answer, and that it is a matter for agreement between the Department and the Committee. The letter also states that we need to be careful. The Department hopes to bring forward a composite set of regulations that are in line with those operating in Great Britain. We will have to avoid having certain regulations subject to affirmative or negative resolutions.

The Chairperson: What are the ramifications of that, in layman's terms?

Mr Brogan: They must be all affirmative or all negative. However, we could, perhaps, split that composite set and lift certain elements of it and subject it to affirmative resolution and allow the bulk to go through under the negative resolution procedure. If all the regulations are subject to affirmative procedure, we will have to go through the whole process again for even a minor technical amendment in a few years' time, and that will take up a lot of Assembly time.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that we will have to go through the whole procedure again if the regulations are subject to affirmative resolution now? Forgive my ignorance on this matter, but the legal advice that was sought by the Department says that there is often no right or wrong answer on the matter for agreement between the Department and Committee. Therefore, whatever suits a particular

situation — be it affirmative or negative — can be used. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Brogan: That is correct.

The Chairperson: How will a pick-and-mix approach, so to speak, affect additional changes or amendments that are sought in the future? Will the Department adopt the same pick-and-mix approach?

Mr Brogan: We could have a set of regulations that contains operational and administrative arrangements — for instance, the application process involved in licensing. The Assembly may not be interested in that, but the Committee would. If that was subject to affirmative resolution and the Assembly looked at it when it was brought into operation, even the most minor amendment would result in an affirmative procedure being adopted in the future. Once affirmative, it is always affirmative.

The Chairperson: I will call on the expertise of the Bill Office Clerk at this point. Is any aspect of that difficult or procedurally fraught for the Committee?

The Clerk of Bills: The letter dated yesterday provides the legal advice that was sought by the Department. It states that: "It was, however, pointed out the need to avoid different elements of a composite set of regulations being subject to different resolution procedures which could potentially prevent the regulations being made."

That shows that in some circumstances it would not present that difficulty. I suggest to the Committee that if you still feel that you want something by affirmative resolution, the Department could look at it and see whether it will cause a difficulty in the future, and examine a wording that would, perhaps, help the Committee if it decides that something should be subject to affirmative resolution.

The Chairperson: That is probably the best idea; it is sound advice. Depending on what matter we are addressing, you can advise us on whether the approach that we plan to adopt would create a major obstacle further down the line.

Mr D Armstrong: If you were attempting to develop a set of regulations for, for example, licensing of operators, and those regulations were subject to both affirmative and negative resolution, the management of which is complex, there might be a problem with workability.

The Chairperson: Although that might be complex, would it be impossible?

Mr D Armstrong: It would not be impossible; however, it might be easier to achieve using one method rather than another. If it were all to be subject to affirmative resolution, from then on, everything

would be affirmative and subsequent actions might be an unfortunate waste of the Assembly's time.

The Chairperson: Returning to John Brogan, are we finished with clause 1?

Mr Brogan: Unless members want me to deal with each issue individually, perhaps, they would be happy to —

The Chairperson: You have given us a broad overview and, considering the synopsis contained in the written submission or, indeed, any other matter that members might consider to be important, we can discuss those matters with regard to clause 1.

We are considering pages 9 to 12 of the summary of points raised in relation to the Bill. Do members wish to discuss any of those points?

Mr T Clarke: I wish to highlight the matters of concern to the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), which are summarised in points 1.2 and 1.3.

The Chairperson: Those points refer to extending the legislation to include vehicles used for agricultural, horticultural or forestry work, and that brings us back to the matter of exemptions. Consequently, resolving such matters will depend on the extent of the exemptions list.

Mr D Armstrong: The Bill will provide powers to make the required exemptions; however, those exemptions will not appear in the Bill's clauses or schedules, but they will be included in regulations.

The Chairperson: Right.

Mr T Clarke: When might we get to see that?

The Chairperson: Do you mean the framework, Trevor?

Mr T Clarke: I mean the list of exemptions.

The Chairperson: We asked that question earlier; however, for vague reasons, such as pressures of work, the list has not been compiled yet.

Mr D Armstrong: Work on that is ongoing. Obviously, the list of exemptions must be finalised before regulations can be issued. However, if you want, we could produce a timetable for when that might happen.

The Chairperson: We need a timetable, but, surely, it is not such a big problem to list the exemptions. I know that you are planning to engage with stakeholders —

Mr D Armstrong: With respect, that is the single most difficult matter in the whole of the Bill.

The Chairperson: We have a fair idea of the issues and of the activities that would be exempted.

Mr D Armstrong: The Department has consistently said that exemptions will be applied if they are justified. As we liaise and consult with the industry and the various stakeholder groups, including the UFU, we will ascertain which exemptions can be justified and, subsequently, we will produce proposals. Any proposals must undergo public consultation and be brought before the Committee. However, we are some time away from having that list of proposed exemptions. Moreover, given the fact that the EU will be issuing exemption regulations, we must consider the matter carefully, rather than quickly.

The Chairperson: The Committee has a lot of EU stuff before it today, and such legislation does not appear to move particularly quickly. Can you give us a flavour of the proposed EU exemption regulations, and what is the timetable for introducing them? We do not wish to pass a Bill if the exemptions are linked to something that might not happen for four or five years.

Mr D Armstrong: The EU will introduce regulations, rather than a directive, and they are expected to come into force in early to mid 2009. Furthermore, in light of that, the Government in GB are planning to review its exemptions. Although I do not have details with me, we have received indications of the exemptions that are likely to be removed. However, they will apply to only the for-hire-or-reward sector. Therefore, we could end up with separate exemption lists for the for-hire-or-reward sector and the own-account sector, and that is another matter about which members may wish to comment.

The Chairperson: In an attempt to tie the matter down, can we agree that all those measures will affect us? First, when will the pending EU regulations come into force?

Mr D Armstrong: It will be later than that.

The Chairperson: In other words, the issue is floating about in the ether, but it is to be met further down the line. The exemptions issue has been a major factor in our discussions with various sectors, some of whom have a more valid claim to an exemption than others. Aside from planning issues, the issue of exemptions is the major factor in the legislation. We would prefer to get that issue tied down and have clarity on it, rather than take the carte blanche approach, which we are expected to take.

Mr D Armstrong: It is difficult to be tied down to a certain time for coming back to you with proposals for the regulations. I can produce a paper for you on the subject of exemptions that outlines the different factors and their timescales. That paper would be available to the Committee before proposals are brought forward.

Mr T Clarke: How can we move without that? I read that the Department was considering giving an exemption to the likes of Roads Service.

The Chairperson: We will come to that later in the meeting.

Mr T Clarke: I have a problem with an exemption being granted to Roads Service. The legislation is supposed to be concerned with road safety, but Roads Service, the Health Service and other agencies have heavy vehicles.

The Chairperson: Trevor, we will come to that issue later; it is covered by paragraph 1.10 of the summary table of issues.

Mr T Clarke: It is linked to the issue that we are discussing.

The Chairperson: I read the summary table last night, and I marked the issue for discussion.

Mr T Clarke: People will perceive that the legislation is not for Government vehicles, but for everyone else.

The Chairperson: I want to tie down the point about exemptions. Donald, you said that you will produce a paper for the Committee on exemptions.

Mr D Armstrong: I will produce a paper that will outline the EU legislation, and who has, to date, sought an exemption and their grounds for doing so. It is too early to say whether I can tie proposals for that. I need to provide the Committee with information on where we are with that.

The Chairperson: There are a lot of blank spaces, and the Committee has, invariably, been lobbied about those.

Mr D Armstrong: I agree. The issue of exemptions is probably the most difficult issue in the Bill, and it must be resolved.

The Chairperson: Lack of detail on the issue makes it difficult because we have to deal with the theory without the practice.

Mr D Armstrong: The difficulty with exemptions is that everyone feels that they should have one, and everyone can justify having one. On the other hand, the issue is complex and there are many ways of getting around the exemptions that currently exist in GB. We want to prevent that type of wooliness in favour of a clear, workable and enforceable system, with which everyone can agree. It is not an easy situation.

The Chairperson: The Committee is being asked to make a stab in the dark on the issue.

Mr D Armstrong: I feel somewhat under pressure to have to provide you with something so that you are clear. However, I will certainly provide you with a paper.

The Chairperson: We do need that.

Mr T Clarke: We should park our consideration of the Bill until we get that paper.

Mr D Armstrong: The purpose of primary legislation is to introduce enabling powers. The next stage is to produce the regulations within that. The Department intends to follow that staged approach. Already, before the primary stage is finished, we are considering how the regulations will be exercised. That has been ongoing for the past few months, so we are well up to speed.

The Chairperson: That issue has not been dealt with, but we will get more elucidation on it. Do any members have issues relating to page 10 of the summary table? That covers the matter of exemption, which we have discussed.

Mr Brogan: Paragraph 1.7 of the summary table mentions exemption for Crown vehicles, and it has been mentioned that that will include the likes of Roads Service and NI Water. Those bodies will not be exempt.

The Chairperson: Will Roads Service and NI Water, which fall under the category of Crown vehicles, not be exempt?

Mr Brogan: Those bodies will not be exempt from the legislation.

The Chairperson: What Crown vehicles do you propose to be exempt from the legislation?

Mr D Armstrong: We have considered the granting of exemptions by function, rather than by vehicle. For example, an exemption may be made for the function of carrying farm produce. That is the way we are thinking in order to try to find a way around a complex issue.

For example, vehicles that are carrying farm produce such as barley, silage or animals will be exempt. However, vehicles that are carrying sand, stone or building materials — which are not farm produce — will not be exempt, even if they use a large tractor and trailer. That is one example of how a function may be exempt. For example, Roads Service vehicles would be exempt when gritting or carrying out an emergency function on the road but would not be exempt for normal business. The Department is considering whether that type of exemption would be effective. However, those proposals have not been finalised.

The Chairperson: I require further clarification. Has the Department considered the exemption of certain Crown vehicles? Will those vehicles be dealt with by function, too?

Mr D Armstrong: We want to deal with exemptions by function rather than because of a person's profession. That includes farmers, horticultural farming, or whatever the business may be.

The Chairperson: We will proceed to page 11. Trevor Clarke mentioned Roads Service vehicles, and

we have established that exemptions for those vehicles will be designated by function.

Mr T Clarke: I do not understand how exemptions for Roads Service vehicles will be dealt with by function. Why is a gritting lorry that carries tonnes of material exempt, yet an operator who carries material for hire or reward is not? I have a problem with that.

The Chairperson: It is difficult to comprehend. Will you clarify that matter?

Mr D Armstrong: Gritting is, in a sense, an emergency operation to provide safety on the roads. There is no choice but to go out and do it. For example, if someone is assigned to a gritting exercise and is required to have a licence to carry out that task, what will happen if that person does not have a licence? It is a potentially serious situation.

Mr T Clarke: Why would that person not have a licence?

Mr D Armstrong: The issue might not arise because if that person is required to have a licence to carry out their other functions, it will cover gritting anyway.

The Chairperson: Gritting lorries, by nature, have a road safety function because they travel on narrow roads and mountainous terrain. My area — and I am sure that it is the same in other members' areas — has many hills and mountains.

Mr D Armstrong: I cited gritting as one function that may be considered as exempt. However, those vehicles have a dual purpose and carry out other Roads Service functions during the day. Those functions will not be exempt. Those vehicles will have a licence anyway, and, therefore, there is no issue with exemption for gritting. We are discussing those matters with Roads Service.

Furthermore, we are discussing issues with the Rivers Agency and the Ulster Farmers' Union. We are considering whether exemptions should apply to functions or to people in their own right. The current exemption system seems to revolve more around exempting people. That is problematic, because if a person is exempt for a specific function, what happens if they carry out a different function that would not normally be exempt? I cited gritting as an example because it is arguable whether or not that function should be exempt.

Mr T Clarke: We mentioned exemptions for normal agricultural practice. What about the contractor?

Mr D Armstrong: For contractors, such as farmers, the produce would be exempt. However, 50% of some contractors' work may focus on farming produce and some may focus on construction work. They should not be exempt for construction work and should not buy that exemption on the back of another one. It is a

difficult area, which is why I am hesitant to say that proposals will be finalised quickly. The issue has greatly exercised the industry and the Committee. Moreover, witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee considered it a big issue.

The Chairperson: We will proceed to point 1.16. Do members have any issues?

We dealt with point 1.16 earlier. John, can we proceed to clause 2, please?

Mr Brogan: Before we do so, Chairman, it is prudent that, throughout the process, I highlight any areas where offences can occur. Certainly, under clause 1(5), it is an offence to use a vehicle without an operator's licence. That carries the maximum fine on the scale, which is £5,000.

I must propose the Department's amendments to clause 1 before we proceed to discussion on clause 2. There are two separate amendments, which are, obviously, linked. The first amendment is to leave out the words:

“within the meaning given in Schedule 1”

at clause 1(2)(a), and to insert at line 16 a new subsection (2)(a). I will not read out the suggested wording, because members have copies. In effect, it sets the threshold at 3.5 tons and allows regulations to deal with vehicle combinations and articulated vehicles.

The Chairperson: I want to return to the issue of the relevant plated weight of a vehicle. I speak as a layman. If you spot a vehicle that looks as though it probably fits under that weight restriction — it may be laden or unladen — what would you do? Would you decide to pull the guy in and examine his vehicle?

Mr D Armstrong: You need to ask enforcement officers that question.

The Chairperson: It seems difficult to discern whether a vehicle fits in that category unless it is quite obviously laden heavily with goods.

Mr T Clarke: Does that not refer to any vehicle that is over the 3.5 ton unladen plated weight and that, therefore, it does not matter how much weight is in the back of it?

Mr D Armstrong: It refers to a gross laden weight — a fully laden weight — of 3.5 tons. The Bill refers to “relevant weight”. Relevant weight could be the plated gross weight of a trailer; the plated unladen weight of a trailer; or the weight of a trailer that has no plated weight. The legislation deals with many combinations.

Similarly, a vehicle, such as a heavy lorry, can have a plated maximum design weight, which would not be the relevant weight as far as we are concerned because the legal weight is the maximum weight. Furthermore, the gross plated weight for the United

Kingdom could be different to that of Germany, for example. Therefore, there is a range of plated weights on vehicles — that is why the term “relevant plated weight” is necessary. Enforcers need to know what the legal weights are in their state. Additionally, they need to know what the unladen weights are that are plated on vehicles.

If you examine the pictures that we provided, there is a trailer, which is out of scope because it is so light, but which carries a van that could weigh a ton. The current system is unsatisfactory on that issue.

The Chairperson: Have members any further comments on that proposed amendment? Do members agree with the amendment as proposed? Do I interpret the silence as “yes”?

Mr T Clarke: I am not sure at which stage I should say no. Do we accept clause 1 by saying yes?

The Chairperson: No; because we have sought further clarification. We are accepting the amendment to clause 1 subject to further clarification about the issue of exemptions that we dealt with earlier.

Mr D Armstrong: Clause 1 provides the power to make exemptions, but what those exemptions would be are dependent on clause 1, so I am slightly puzzled at the concern about approving clause 1.

The Chairperson: We are not concerned about approving clause 1; we are concerned that we are adopting a clause when we are not fully and comprehensively informed of the issues. That is why we agreed earlier how we will proceed when you report back to us, Donald.

Mr Brogan: Clause 2 establishes the two different types of licences — the restricted licence and the standard licence. There will be two different types of standard licence.

The restricted licence will allow the operator to carry his own goods as part of his business or trade. He must not carry goods for other people for hire or reward under a restricted licence. There will be two different types of standard licences. A standard national licence will allow the operator to carry his own goods and carry goods for other people for hire or reward in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The standard international licence will allow the operator to carry goods in the UK and on international journeys, including Ireland.

Clause 2 states that it is an offence to carry goods for hire or reward under a restricted licence and/or to carry goods on international operations under a standard national licence. Fines will be £1,000, which is level 3. That replicates the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995 in GB.

The Chairperson: No issues arose from the consultation. Do members have anything to add?

Mr T Clarke: Why are there three different bands?

Mr D Armstrong: The hire-for-reward sector bands are set in European legislation. Standard licences allow drivers to operate in their own member state and international licences allow operators to cross state boundaries. In such cases, operators need a community authorisation when they are in those countries. Those authorisations are required in the EU. The own-account sector requires a licence that allows operators to carry their own goods. The standards that they require are different — on a standard licence, the operator must have a qualified certificate of professional competence (CPC) person in relation to maintenance. The own-account sector is a lesser standard; operators in that sector do not require that certificate. The requirements are not as high in the restricted area.

Mr T Clarke: Is there any cost difference?

Mr D Armstrong: There is no cost difference — it is the same cost across the sectors. Some people in the own-account sector in Northern Ireland have a standard licence because they want to have the option of doing hire for reward when they want to.

Mr T Clarke: What is the definition of an own-account haulier?

Mr D Armstrong: An own-account haulier carries his own goods as part of his trade or business. He does not carry anyone else's goods.

Mr T Clarke: What licence is a courier company required to hold?

Mr D Armstrong: A courier company is required to hold a standard licence.

Mr T Clarke: Is a courier company required to hold a certificate of professional competence (CPC) licence as well?

Mr D Armstrong: No. A courier company must hold a standard licence; in addition, the company must provide evidence of professional competence in the maintenance of its vehicles.

Mr T Clarke: Where does the CPC licence come in?

Mr D Armstrong: The holder of a CPC licence is a person who is certified as competent to provide a fleet maintenance and management function.

Mr T Clarke: Are there many such people in Northern Ireland?

Mr D Armstrong: Yes, there are quite a few. Hire-for-reward operators are required by EU legislation to hold a CPC licence. All hire-for-reward operators in Northern Ireland hold that licence. The Department has not extended that requirement to the

own-account sector. We will not ask for that extension when restricted licences are introduced.

Many operators in the own-account sector, particularly big companies such as Tesco, already hold CPC licences, even though they are not required to by law.

Mr T Clarke: I am not worried about those companies. I am worried about the smaller operators who carry someone else's goods.

Mr D Armstrong: Current legislation requires those operators to demonstrate that they have that professional competence in their management function. That is an EU requirement.

Mr Ford: I presume that there are no international implications with regard to the restricted licence for cross-border operators.

Mr D Armstrong: No. There is no requirement for a restricted licence across the border at the moment.

The Chairperson: Do members have anything further to add in relation to clause 2?

Mr T Clarke: May I ask Donald to provide the Committee with a list of people who can provide that professional competence for the smaller operators? He said that there were quite a few.

Mr D Armstrong: The Department does not keep a register of those people. We are not required to do so. We can provide the Committee with the names of the bodies that provide CPC training and certification.

The Chairperson: It is done separately.

Mr D Armstrong: It is a separate issue.

The Chairperson: Is the certificate issued separately?

Mr D Armstrong: A company that carries goods for reward is required by law to have professional competence in the management of its transport operations.

Mr T Clarke: Is that certificate required regardless of the size of a company's operation or the size of its fleet?

Mr D Armstrong: It could be that two or three small companies, with one or two lorries each, will have one person contracted to them to provide that competence. Not every operator has to employ a person with a CPC certificate. That is an important point to make.

The Chairperson: We will move on to clause 3. There does not seem to be any issues with it. Will you give us an overview on clause 3?

Mr Beggs: I am not aware of any issues having been raised in relation to clause 2. Are we accepting clause 2, or are we going to go back to it again? Do we formally record —

The Chairperson: We are scrutinising the clauses today. When the time comes, there will be a formal process in which I will put the question on the clauses.

The Chairperson: If there are any issues to consider, John, please let us know. Will you give us a brief overview of clause 3?

Mr Brogan: Clause 3 allows the Department to grant a temporary exemption from the requirement to hold a standard licence, thereby enabling an emergency to be dealt with or a special need to be met. The Department hopes that it will be used only rarely. For example, in GB, the exemption was granted during the last foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. It was also used during a period of drought in Yorkshire in order to enable tankers to bring water to rural areas.

Mr Ford: Did those powers in GB fall to the commissioner or to the Department?

Mr Brogan: It would have been exercised by the commissioner.

The Chairperson: Do members have anything further to add to clause 3? If not, we will move on to clause 4.

Mr Brogan: Clause 4 deals with vehicles that are authorised or permitted to be used under an operator's licence. In essence, the licence will authorise the use of any vehicle or trailer in the lawful possession of the licence holder. The Bill differs from the GB Act in clause 4(4), which states that: "(4) An operator's licence shall not authorise the use of any vehicle unless—

(a) the place which is for the time being its operating centre is in Northern Ireland; and

(b) the vehicle is registered under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 (c. 22)."

That Act deals with the proper registration of vehicles throughout the UK, as it involves the issue of registration plates and the payment of motor tax. It is not included in the GB legislation, although we suspect that they would like to do so, given the chance. Its purpose in the Bill is to overcome the problem that our enforcement teams encounter where a foreign vehicle is registered on a Northern Ireland operator's licence. Sometimes it is difficult for the enforcement teams to prove who the actual user is when a vehicle is detected committing an offence. However, if the licence only authorises vehicles that are registered under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 (VERA), then tracking the vehicle keeper and the actual user will be much easier.

The Chairperson: Say one of those operator centres was located in Newry or up round Derry — as we know, there are vehicles registered on both sides of the border, and companies have cross-border operations and that is the nature of business as they go

where the trade takes them — does that mean that there would be a difficulty, just because a vehicle is registered with Dublin or Donegal plates?

Mr Brogan: It would.

The Chairperson: I find that difficult; that could hit people who have a business of that nature.

Mr Brogan: It is designed to overcome problems that our enforcement teams encounter. If they detect a vehicle that has committed an offence, and if that vehicle is registered elsewhere, it is difficult for them to trace it back to the user or the owner.

The Chairperson: Surely, if a driver is caught speeding down South, there are arrangements between both authorities to establish the owner or the registered user of the vehicle?

Mr D Armstrong: The purpose of clause 4(4) is to try to stop vehicles from outside the jurisdiction being used within the jurisdiction, particularly for illegal operations.

The Chairperson: Nevertheless, the very fact that the vehicle is registered outside the jurisdiction makes it illegal — that is my understanding.

Mr D Armstrong: Yes; anybody who is on a current licence will have to use vehicles that are registered within the United Kingdom.

Mr Beggs: It would be useful to give us an example of the problems that you face and the reasons for introducing the change; it would give us a better understanding.

Mr D Armstrong: It is to do with the detection of vehicles that are committing road-transport and traffic offences that are from outside the jurisdiction, and how that can be carried through to ultimate prosecution. A vehicle that drives outside the jurisdiction is hard to trace and chase. There is much more control if the vehicle is based in Northern Ireland. That does not mean that a vehicle currently registered in the South cannot be taken off an operator's licence as part of a sanction if that vehicle is misbehaving; that can still be done.

The Chairperson: Yes. However, I am trying to deal with the practical realities of a situation where businesses have some of their vehicles registered South of the border and some registered in the North.

Mr D Armstrong: Those vehicles are operating with legitimate licences registered with a company. At the end of the day, this clause does not exist in GB because it does not have land borders with any other country: its vehicles are all registered in GB.

The Chairperson: Those vehicles are all right. However, we are in a different situation and in a different place. I do not think that clause 4(4)(b) takes account of that reality.

Mr D Armstrong: Can we look at that and come back to the Committee?

The Chairperson: You would need to; otherwise further problems will be created down the line.

Mr T Clarke: Not really, Chairman. We are dealing with Northern Ireland legislation, and surely we should be encouraging operators to pay their licence fees in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. However, it depends on the situation, and the nature of the place and the operation. I know people whose vehicles are registered in the South but they are based in the North, with a subsidiary operation in the South.

Mr D Armstrong: I can understand the legitimacy of that proposal in the case of an operator who has employees and vehicles on this side of the border — for example, in Newry or Armagh — and on the other side of the border.

The Chairperson: We need to examine that matter because it reflects the reality here.

Mr Brogan: We propose that two minor amendments are made to clause 4, which are to insert the words “if any” at the end of clause 4(5)(b) and after the words “prescribed fee” in clause 4(6).

The Chairperson: That sounds promising.

Mr T Clarke: We could insert the words “when we wish” instead.

The Chairperson: That would take account of the credit crunch. *[Laughter.]*

Subject to clarity being provided in the cases of operators who have employees and vehicles on both sides of the border, are members content with those two amendments?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Ford: Clause 4(5), 4(6) and 4(8) all make reference to “the Department”. In GB, do those provisions apply to the traffic commissioner?

Mr Brogan: Those measures would be exercised by the traffic commissioner.

Clause 5 specifies the maximum number of vehicles and trailers that can be used under the licence. In the road haulage business, the difference between the maximum number of vehicles authorised and the number of vehicles that is specified on the licence is called the margin. Clause 4(3) to 4(6) provide for that margin.

Applicants will be encouraged to apply for more vehicles than they initially need, which will enable them to deal with any day-to-day operational problems without having to apply to the Department to vary their licence. That is linked to the period of grace, which is provided for in the previous section. It will be an

offence to exceed the maximum number of vehicles, and the subsequent fine could be up to level 4, which is £2,500.

Mr T Clarke: If an operator specifies that he has five vehicles when applying for a licence, is a further fee applicable if he wants to add to his fleet at a later date?

Mr Brogan: That would be an application to vary the licence, which is covered later in the Bill.

Clause 6 provides the Bill's first mention of operating centres. It defines an operating centre and states that an operator should not use any place as an operating centre that is not specified on the licence. There is further reference to operating centres later in the Bill.

The Chairperson: You proposed that an operating centre would be defined as the place where the vehicle is normally kept, but that is slightly at variance with the earlier definition — it is perhaps not as expansive.

Mr D Armstrong: My suggestion was that the definition of operating centre could be amended to mean either the base or centre from which the vehicle operates and/or is normally parked when not in use.

The Chairperson: That would be subject to us getting some kind of resolution on the planning issues.

Mr D Armstrong: The Bill could then provide a definition that covers a place from which a person operates and a place where he parks.

The Chairperson: Clause 6 will therefore be subject to a further amendment, and the planning issue must also be resolved.

We now move to clause 7.

Mr Brogan: Clauses 7 to 11 set out the application process for licences. This group of clauses provides for the Department to seek certain information from an applicant, and for the requirement for the applicant to publish a notice of the application in the newspapers. It also deals with the process of making an objection to, and representations against, the applications.

Clause 7 deals with the application that is to be made to the Department. A person can hold only one licence at a time in Northern Ireland, and the Department is empowered to prescribe in the regulations all the information that will be needed in the application form. It is fair to say that the regulations will be significant. The information that will be required will include declarations on notifiable convictions and fixed or others penalties, as well as information on financial resources and details on the vehicles to be used and the operating centre. However, this provision is not new. Powers already exist in the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 that allow the Department to gather similar information that is necessary for dealing with the current licensing system.

The Chairperson: Do Members have any issues that they wish to raise in relation to clauses 7 to 11?

Mr Brogan: I have outlined clause 7 only.

The Chairperson: Could you give us an overview of all of them, please?

Mr Brogan: Clause 8 requires the applicant to provide details of any convictions or penalties occurred in the time between making the application and the application being disposed of — in effect, where a decision is made. It will be an offence to fail to meet that requirement with a fine up to level 4, which is £2,500.

Clause 9 requires that the Department will publish a notice of any application for a licence made to it, and the notice should explain how objections or representations may be made. The nature and form of the notice will be described in detail in the regulations provided for under the clause.

Clause 10 sets out how an applicant will have to publish a notice that he or she has applied for an operator's licence. That will give formal notice to people who own or occupy buildings or land close to the proposed operating centre, so that they will have an opportunity to make representations against the application. The application itself will be refused immediately if the notice is not published, and there will be discretion to accept an application in circumstances where the notice did not comply with the normal requirements but the Department is satisfied that no one's interests will have been prejudiced as a result. In this case, the notice will have to be placed in a local newspaper that covers the place where the operating centre would be located.

Clause 11 deals with objections and representations. It establishes the right to object or to make representations against an application. The person who may object or make representations will be restricted, as will the grounds on which they are to be made. Objections are different to representations. Clause 11(1), 11(2) and 11(3) deal with the objections, and they will come from certain prescribed trade unions and associations, the police, local councils and Government Departments.

The bodies may object on the grounds that any of the requirements of clause 12 on good repute, financial standing or professional competence are not satisfied, or that the operating centre is unsuitable on environmental grounds. I will explain what is meant by "environmental grounds" when we discuss clause 31.

Clause 11(4) and 11(5) deal with the representations against the issue of operator's licences. An owner or occupier of land in the vicinity of a proposed operating centre can make a representation against the proposal on the grounds that it would be environmentally

unsuitable. Any adverse effects from using the site as an operating centre should be serious enough to affect their use or their enjoyment of the land.

The remaining subsections of clause 11 deal with the process for making rejections and representations, and the time frame and information that is needed.

The Chairperson: Does any member have an issue with clauses 7 to 11?

Mr Ford: I noticed that the word “Department” appears in each of the clauses.

The Chairperson: I propose to conclude our deliberations on the Bill, because we have other issues to deal with. I thank Donald, Gillian and John for their time and for taking us through the Bill. We will come back to that at our next meeting.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

6 November 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
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Craig Allen	} Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mr Martin Bradley	
Mr Ivan McMaster	
Mr Bernard Mitchell	

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): We now move to the clause-by-clause consideration of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill. I welcome Bernard Mitchell, Ivan McMaster, Craig Allen and the Chief Nursing Officer, Martin Bradley. At last week's meeting, the Committee agreed the non-contentious clauses and those where our proposals were accepted by the Department.

We will consider the remaining 12 clauses and three schedules. The Department has not accepted — or fully accepted — our proposals regarding those clauses. After listening to the views of the Department, the Committee must decide whether it is content with each clause as it is drafted or agree amendments that will be included in the Committee's report and tabled for debate at the Bill's Consideration Stage.

Members will be aware that the Assembly agreed to grant a short extension to the period in which the Committee Stage must be completed. However, I

strongly suggest that we complete the Bill's clause-by-clause consideration today. The Committee's report will be prepared after the meeting.

The papers that have been provided for members include a follow-up letter from the British Medical Association (BMA) about the evidence session that took place on 2 October; a revised version of the Department's response to the various clauses; the Hansard reports of previous meetings; and a briefing paper from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Clause 1 (Restructuring of administration of health and social care)

The Chairperson: Officials outlined the meaning of clause 1 at a previous meeting. It deals with the generality of the restructuring of the organisations and the bodies that will be dissolved. Clause 1 also provides for several bodies' names to be changed and defines the proposed health and social care bodies.

Members raised two concerns about clause 1 during the previous discussions. The first of those concerns regarded the use of the initialism "RQIA" — to refer to the health and social care regulation and quality improvement authority — in clause 1(2) (b) and throughout the Bill. The Committee suggested that the abbreviation "health and social care RQIA" should be used instead. The Committee also regarded the initialism "RAPHSW" — to refer to the proposed regional agency for public health and social well-being — as cumbersome.

I invite the officials to brief the Committee on the Department's response to those concerns.

Mr Ivan McMaster (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): After discussions with the Office of the Legislative Counsel, the Department felt that the initialism "RQIA" should continue to be used throughout the Bill. Initialisms and acronyms are designed to provide a shortened version of terms. We do not feel that the term "health and social care RQIA" fulfils that purpose. In any case, RQIA is a widely accepted initialism.

The Chairperson: Therefore, the Department does not accept the Committee's first suggestion.

Mr McMaster: The Department agreed that the initialism "RAPHSW" is something of a tongue-twister. We propose that the term "regional agency" should be used in its place throughout the Bill.

The Chairperson: One of the Committee's two recommendations was accepted. I suppose that that is not a bad outcome.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 1, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 4 (Department's priorities and objectives)

The Chairperson: Officials explained that clause 4 will make it a statutory requirement for the Department to determine its priorities and objectives for the provision of health and social care regularly. The Department can revise those priorities and objectives, but it must consult with the bodies in question before doing so.

Officials also pointed out that clause 4(3) releases the Department from the obligation to consult when urgent action is required, and there is no time for consultation. Members had concerns about that provision and asked the officials to consider two possible amendments. First, the word "extreme" should be inserted to make the clause read thus:

"because of the extreme urgency of the matter".

Secondly, the Department should be required to report and review instances retrospectively when it acted without consultation because of the urgency of the situation. I again invite officials to brief the Committee on the Department's response to those points.

Mr McMaster: We propose to reject the suggestion that the phrase "extremely urgent" should be used. The difficulties concern the definition of the word "extremely" and trying to separate that from "urgent". More importantly, if a provision is included that exempts the Department from consulting in extremely urgent cases, it means that we would have to consult in ordinary urgent cases, which seems to defeat the purpose of the provision in the first place. It is because of that difficulty that we propose to reject that suggested amendment.

The second issue concerns reporting afterwards. We propose the following wording:

"Where the Department is of the opinion that because of the urgency of the matter it is necessary to act under subsection (1) without consultation —

- (a) subsection (2) does not apply; but
- (b) the Department must as soon as reasonably practical give notice to such bodies as it thinks appropriate of the grounds on which the Department formed that opinion."

In other words, if the Department acts in a case of urgency, it is required to consult with those bodies and provide the reasons that it formed that opinion.

The Chairperson: Again, it is a case of one amendment being accepted and another being rejected.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 4, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 6 (Power of Department to give direction to certain bodies)

The Chairperson: Similarly to clause 4, members had concerns about the provision in clause 6(3)(a), which states that the Department is not required to consult:

"because of the urgency of the matter, it is necessary to give directions without that consultation".

Officials agreed to consider similar amendments as in clause 4, which is to insert "extreme" before "urgency" and to report retrospectively when action is taken without consultation.

Mr McMaster: The Department again rejected the suggested amendment because of the same reasons in clause 4 — the difficulties around the phrases "extreme urgency" and "urgency". However, we accept that there is a need for the Department to explain its reasons for doing so. We propose an amendment to clause 6(3), so that it would read: "Where the Department is of the opinion that because of the urgency of the matter it is necessary to give directions under subsection (1) without consulting the body concerned —

- (a) subsection (2) does not apply; but
- (b) the Department must as soon as reasonably practicable give notice to that body of the grounds on which the Department formed that opinion."

We also propose to insert new clause 6(3A):

"Where the Department is of the opinion that (for any reason other than the urgency of the matter) it is not reasonably practical to comply with subsection (2) —

- (a) that subsection does not apply; but
- (b) the Department must as soon as reasonably practicable give notice to the body concerned of the grounds on which the Department formed that opinion."

Therefore, the Department is committed to explaining to the bodies concerned why it formed an opinion that it could not consult in advance.

The Chairperson: What is the purpose of proposed new clause 6(3A)?

Mr McMaster: Proposed new clause 6(3A) is slightly different. There are two situations in which the Department does not consider consultation to be necessary. The first situation is because of the urgency of the matter, and the second is because it is not otherwise practicable. In order to achieve clarity, the draftsman entered a second subsection to deal with cases in which it is not reasonably practicable.

The Chairperson: I understand the logic — I think.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendments, *put and agreed to*.

Clause 6, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 8 (Functions of the Regional Board)

The Chairperson: Officials explained that clause 8 outlines the functions of the regional board, which are chiefly those transferred to it from the four existing boards and any other function that the Department directs. The officials explained that clause 8(3) requires the board to draft a commissioning plan. In doing so, it must consult the regional agency and have due regard to its views. Members should note that uncertainty about the various bodies' relationships — particularly the relationship between the regional board and the regional agency — is a recurring theme in written submissions received by the Committee.

The officials explained earlier that the Minister is considering strengthening that provision by requiring the board and the agency to sign off the commissioning plan jointly. After initial consideration, members were content with that clause as presently drafted, subject to consideration of the joint sign-off proposal.

Mr McMaster: Unfortunately, I am unable to outline the wording. The Department is committed to suggesting an amendment to provide for joint sign-off of the commissioning plan. The wording has not yet been agreed. The Department intends, before Consideration Stage, to clarify that amendment.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to*.

Clause 8, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 9 (Local Commissioning Groups)

The Chairperson: Clause 9 deals with the establishment of the local commissioning groups. Members raised concerns about the wording of clause 9(4)(b)(i), which refers to consultation with the regional agency. The Royal College of Nursing called for that provision to be strengthened, and officials had agreed to consider that suggestion.

Mr McMaster: We have drafted an amendment. The Department believes that it is preferable that the wording of the clause now compels each local commissioning group, in the exercise of its functions, to:

"work in collaboration with the regional agency and have due regard to any advice or information provided by it;"

The draftsman raised concerns about the previously suggested wording. The term "in partnership" has legal connotations and may suggest a formal relationship. The Department does not want to tie two bodies to such a relationship, because it is difficult for two separate organisations to have regard to each other's priorities.

Mr Easton: I am happy enough with that.

Clause 9(2) states:

"Each Local Commissioning Group shall exercise its functions as regards such area of Northern Ireland as may be prescribed."

Should we not try to change that to:

"exercise its functions within local government districts."?

I do not want local commissioning groups to criss-cross all over the place. Do you see where I am coming from?

The Chairperson: The areas will be prescribed in the regulations, and the Committee will have an opportunity to scrutinise those.

Mr Easton: Will we?

The Chairperson: They will be subject to scrutiny.

Mr Bernard Mitchell (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): At a previous meeting, I was asked for, and gave, a commitment that, on completion of local government reform, the boundaries of the local commissioning groups would be reviewed to ensure appropriate coterminosity. I am prepared to restate that commitment.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to*.

Clause 9, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 12 (The Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being)

The Chairperson: We move now to clause 12 and the corresponding schedule 2. During earlier consideration, members were divided on the merits of a separate regional public health agency. The issue has been discussed in some detail at Committee meetings on 2, 9 and 16 October 2008, and members have a copy of the transcripts.

Some members questioned the merits of setting up a separate agency, arguing that it would create another layer of bureaucracy, be contrary to the aim of creating more efficient structures, and its functions could be dealt with by the regional board. Other members strongly supported a separate agency, arguing that a much stronger public-health message is required. Officials agreed to provide additional information on the likely structures and costs involved. Ivan, I invite

you to talk us through clause 12 because it received a good airing, and two opposing opinions were expressed.

Mr Mitchell: In response to the request at a previous meeting, we have tried to provide a clear illustration of the respective position of the agency. We have provided a diagram in which we tried to map the agency's position and the interrelationships between it, the Department, the board and other bodies. We also outlined in more detail the specified functions of the agency. I am happy to go through the reasons that the Department advocates a separate agency.

The Chairperson: Please do, because it is a contentious subject that, if possible, we would like to resolve.

Mr Mitchell: The case for the agency that underpinned its inclusion in the package of reforms, of which it is considered an important element, relates to public health. The most recent figures available compare public health and well-being in 1999, 2001 and in 2004-06. They show that life expectancy remains worse in the most deprived areas than in Northern Ireland overall: the life expectancy of males is 3·8 years lower and that of females is 2·6 years lower. We consider that the issue of public health and well-being that we are seeking to address is a key challenge faced by the health and social care system in the years ahead.

The feeling was that the arrangements that have been in place in the past, although they have certainly made improvements, have not made the degree of improvement that is considered necessary, and it is felt that a different, more radical, approach is required.

The concept of the agency acquired significant support in the responses to the public consultation, including from: the Royal College of Physicians in London; the Northern Ireland Chief Environmental Health Officers Group; the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh; the Institute of Public Health in Ireland; the Health Promotion Agency; the Royal College of Midwives; the Health Protection Agency in London; the British Dental Association; and the Advisory Committee of the Allied Health Professions (Northern Ireland).

The proposed agency would, in partnership with local government and other key stakeholders, provide a focus on issues of public health and well-being, anticipating, and consistent with, proposals for community planning and would seek to have pilot schemes in operation in 2009-10. It is the view of the Department that, under the remit of the proposed regional health and social care board, there remains a risk that public health and well-being will not be prioritised, because of the very significant pressures that will otherwise be faced by that body.

It has been pointed out in previous discussions that the staff of the agency will be co-located and work in a fully integrated way with the staff of the board in supporting the work of the local commissioning groups. The agency will have real influence over the full range of the £4 billion committed annually by the regional health and social care board, and that influence will be spelt out in legislation, including the need for formal approval of the commissioning plan. That point was discussed earlier, in relation to clause 9.

That is a key issue: the agency is not simply concerned with the funding that it receives directly from the Department and which it allocates for health improvement and health protection, and so forth. It also brings real influence — with teeth — to bear on the full £4 billion worth of expenditure that the regional board will commit every year to ensure that public health and well-being achieve the necessary priority.

The staffing of the new organisation is estimated to consist of around 200 to 250 staff, subject to the completion of a staff-mapping exercise. Those staff are currently employed by boards and trusts, the Health Promotion Agency and the research and development office, and are doing work that will continue to be required, irrespective of the organisational structures that are put in place. No matter what structure is established, the great majority of the staff that might be employed in the agency will still have to do that work, whether in a board or in another organisational arrangement. Those are not 200 or 250 additional staff who would not be required if the agency were not established; the great majority of those staff will continue to be required. As we sit here today, they are working in all those bodies, carrying out commissioning work, research and development, and so forth.

We have sought to design the two bodies to avoid duplication as far as possible. It is estimated that, if the agency were to be merged with the board, the savings would primarily be in the boardroom and would be made on positions such as the chairperson, the chief executive, one or two directors, the non-executive directors and any associated costs. The bulk of the staff in question are carrying out functions that will be needed no matter what structure is established. That is a fundamental point.

Mr Martin Bradley (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am very conscious that there is a division of opinion about the agency and the board, and how those two organisations can be brought together to work in tandem. I do not want to rehearse the arguments that the Committee has heard from the Chief Medical Officer, but, speaking as a nurse and as the Chief Nursing Officer, there are still unacceptable variations in health outcomes in Northern

Ireland. That is in spite of having 60 years of the Health Service. We are still not getting something right. We have a real opportunity to do something different that will put us ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom, and having an agency that is dedicated to solving some of the fairly wicked problems that we are faced with would do that.

I meet health visitors, school nurses and hospital and community midwives regularly. They are aware of the conditions that people in Northern Ireland have to live with. We must try to do something about that and articulate a much better vision as to how we get ahead of some of the lifestyle choices that we must make if we are to have a better outcome for the people of Northern Ireland and the next generation — particularly mothers and children.

If we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got. We have a real opportunity to get ahead of the game, do something different and, in particular, build a cohort of staff who can focus in a new way, without the encumbrance of having to do all the firefighting that we do daily in the Health Service. We must try to get ahead and have some dedicated time to have a dedicated resource and the expertise, the thought and the intelligence to put us ahead on some of the major issues that we continue to face.

Without rehearsing all the arguments that the Chief Medical Officer outlined, as Chief Nursing Officer, I see a real opportunity for us to do something different.

The Chairperson: Although I am Chairperson, I have a concern about a further tier of bureaucracy; if the regional agency is going to be part and parcel of the board in any case, why make it a separate stand-alone agency? I have concerns about equality. What patterns are we using to target social need and areas of high need that will ensure that both communities receive a fair coverage of moneys and input into healthcare promotion and all that that entails? On what are you basing your areas? What mapping is being used? I make no apology for being concerned that some communities — particularly unionist communities — have not seen the same input of moneys down through the years. I am not being politically obstinate or trying to raise a red flag to a bull. It is a fact that some of the most deprived areas are unionist, and areas such as the Shankill Road and Tullycarnet come to mind.

I am afraid that it will be the same old, same old, where there is a wide proofing — if that is needed or if that is the proper word — but unionist communities have suffered quite considerably in not being able to project their needs as well as the Roman Catholic community; I say that without any bias. That is a major worry, and it is the reason that I am concerned about

what you are establishing as areas of need and where that goes back to.

Mr Martin Bradley: Your points are well made. We can have a much better public debate about how some of the problems will be tackled if we can establish a more coherent agency to deal with those issues. The main factors that drive the issue are education and unemployment. Yesterday, the Institute for Public Health in Ireland published a report showing the clear link between educational outcomes and life chances.

It is true that, in our communities, people achieve different educational outcomes, and people have a different attitude towards education, which does affect how they go through their lives and the consequences that that can have for local communities. Part of this discussion has to be about empowering people and local communities, but it is also about consistent, persistent, concentrated public-health action. It is about mobilising a significant resource. In the world in which I live — of health visiting, district nursing and, in particular, community midwifery — the focus must be on the real areas of need.

I am currently conducting a review of health visiting and school nursing, one of the outcomes of which will be a more focused attempt to target those families that are in the most need. They are spread across both communities. You are right; there are issues in Northern Ireland on how communities access services and how services are best used. A public health agency would be empowered to begin to raise the profile of those wicked issues and begin that debate — not only with the public but with Departments. Part of the conversation a while ago was about the need for more co-ordinated working — for instance, between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Mitchell: The information that I quoted earlier came from the Department's report, 'Health and Social Care Inequalities Monitoring System: Changes in the Life Expectancy Gap 1999/01–2004/06'. It is worth highlighting one of the issues underpinning the reforms — that is, democratisation. The proposal is that the agency will have two local government representatives on its board. The agency will also be charged with leadership in progressing local government partnerships across Northern Ireland and with the intention of our trying to put in place, in theory, pilot schemes from April 2009, which would anticipate community planning and wider community engagement.

The issue of democratisation can also be read across into the membership of local commissioning groups, and so forth, which will include four local government representatives. There is a vein of democratisation

running through the reform package, which, I hope, would give appropriate political input.

Mr Easton: I had the chance to speak to representatives from different health agencies and bodies who attended the DUP party conference last weekend. We have been led to believe that everybody is in favour of the new public health agency. I am not against it, but I am against an extra layer of bureaucracy and the associated costs. I think that that can be done in the regional board, and I cannot see the point of the agency being a separate body.

Many representatives of the health bodies with whom I have spoken do not see why the agency's functions cannot be kept within the regional board. The same functions would be carried out; the board could be toughened up and could do the new things that we require of it. I do not care what anyone says — it will cost money to set up the agency. It will create an extra layer of bureaucracy, which we are meant to be doing away with as we enhance, and create a better, Health Service. Given the extra bureaucracy and cost, I would be happier if the agency's functions were kept within the regional board. I have heard no arguments to convince me otherwise. At the risk of being on my own on this issue, I propose that the public health agency is incorporated into the regional health and social care board under clause 7.

Mr McCallister: I oppose Alex's idea. The public health role is too important not to have an agency focusing on it. Last year's debate on the Budget highlighted to me — as did Professor Appleby's evidence to the Committee, and also what Martin has said — that, if we fail to engage the public with their health, we are sitting on a funding time bomb for health services in years to come.

We must raise our game. Health promotion is one positive way to do that. I support the creation of a regional agency that focuses on that agenda. Previously, the Minister has talked about the need to work with local government in order to deliver some of that agenda on the ground. Members all know of areas of deprivation and inequality where public health must be promoted, as well as among the general population.

Ms S Ramsey: My party does not support Alex's proposal. At previous meetings, the point has been made that the issue is health promotion and the Investing for Health strategy. The body that is involved with that must be proactive. All the Committee's discussions during the past few weeks have been about the need to tackle illness in all communities, because all areas suffer from poor health and illness. We must be proactive on public health.

I am interested in the connection that was made between poor health and poor educational attainment. It is important, therefore, that a collective body exists

that is involved in proactive health promotion and will have the authority — for want of a better word — to hold other Departments to account, whether that be DSD, DCAL, DE or DEL, and so on. My party does not support Alex's proposal.

Mrs Hanna: The SDLP will not support the proposal either. I will certainly raise my concerns. I want the focus to be on public health. For years, I have been a champion of public health. I raised concerns about how the regional agency would have teeth and would have a meaningful relationship with communities. We have been given some answers. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We understand that.

Inevitably, there will be costs. However, if lives are saved through prevention and early intervention, money will be saved down the line. I firmly believe that if the agency can work, money will be saved. We must watch it and ensure that it works.

Dr Deeny: I want to respond as someone who is interested in public health and who has worked in the Health Service for many years. I have taken on board Alex's point. We all accept that, for many years, the Health Service has been over-administrated and over-bureaucratized. That has now been addressed.

My worry is that, if the agency is incorporated into the board, it will be low on the pecking order of importance and priority — as, indeed, the Chief Medical Officer has mentioned. Public health, health promotion and disease prevention are major elements of the future of healthcare. For far too long, we have waited until people become sick before we treat them, which costs a lot of money. As I have said before, my worry, as a doctor, is that, if the agency is incorporated into the board, public health, health promotion and disease prevention will not have a strong enough voice.

I understand that the agency needs to work with local commissioning groups. I like the terminology: "democratisation". That is important; every area of health must be represented and have input, not only from political representatives but from GPs in local areas. It is important, too, for the future of commissioning for the health needs of local areas' populations.

I asked you about the number of administrative staff in the Health Service, Bernard. You mentioned that 700 people are employed by the Department, 400 people by the regional board, and 250 to 350 — let us say 300 — by the agency. That is a total of 1,400. I know that there is a bigger picture and that staff are employed outside Belfast. However, the public will see that as 1,400 people, who are mainly based in Belfast, administering for a population of 1.7 million people. That seems like an awful lot of staff. Therefore, I agree with Alex on that point.

I do not suggest that people should lose their jobs, as has occurred in trusts and boards. The Minister has explained that some of those staff will leave the Health Service through “natural wastage”, without any enforced or compulsory redundancies. Has the Department reviewed its staff numbers — which exceed 700 — with a view to making efficiency savings? To those 700 staff in the Department must be added 400 and a further 300; that comes to 1,400 people. The point is often made to me that one could slim down the bureaucracy and still have sufficient staff to man the agency.

Mr Mitchell: The answer in respect of the Department is yes. The Department’s staff total will be reduced from over 1,000. My bitter experience is that staff numbers of any organisation, considered in isolation, always sound large. One must consider what it is the officials do before one can decide whether the number of officials is justified.

Those staff were never envisaged as being entirely based in Belfast. The Minister has made it clear to workshops that I have attended that we envisaged maintaining a significant local presence across the Province. The majority of the staff about whom we are talking will probably be based in local environments. They cannot support local commissioning groups and local family practitioner services from a base in Belfast. It has never been our intention to base all those folk in Belfast: we have always been clear that we will maintain a strong local presence.

One must not lose sight of the overarching savings to which the Department is committed: £53 million and a reduction of 1,700 posts, primarily in administrative and managerial grades. That remains the case irrespective of the structures. Those targets must still be met.

The Chairperson: I will put the question; however, even if this proposal falls, no party is precluded from tabling amendments at Consideration Stage.

Question proposed:

That the regional public health agency be incorporated into the proposed regional board under clause 7. —
[Mr Easton.]

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 2; Noes 6.

AYES

Mr Easton, Mrs I Robinson.

NOES

Dr Deeny, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mr McCallister, Mrs O’Neill, Ms S Ramsey.

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 2.

AYES

Dr Deeny, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mr McCallister, Mrs O’Neill, Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Easton, Mrs I Robinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Functions of RAPHSW)

The Chairperson: When clause 13 was previously considered, members raised three concerns about the drafting of the clause, which were highlighted in written submissions.

Disability Action called for clause 13(2)(b) to be expanded to better outline the health-promotion function, and the British Red Cross asked for the same paragraph to be strengthened by including a reference to risk reduction. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry called for the regional agency to be required to consult the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety before making persons, materials and facilities available to other bodies. I invite Ivan to talk us through this.

Mr McMaster: We accept the suggestion to expand the wording with regard to the health-promotion function of the regional agency. We propose to table an amendment so that clause 13(2)(b) would read as follows: “The health promotion function is including, in particular, enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health and social well-being.”

That, incidentally, is the recognised World Health Organization definition of health promotion. Our intention is to make it clear what health promotion actually means. It also has the benefit of retaining the phrase “health promotion”, which is a recognisable phrase.

We do not propose to include the phrase “risk reduction”. It was felt that risk reduction was already included. If one is increasing control over, and improving, one’s health and social well-being, risk reduction is considered to be a part of that, without having to say so specifically.

A third issue was raised: to include, in clause 13(4) (e), the words:

“including the Assembly Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee”

after the words “any other body”. We decided not to accept that change. This provision is intended to allow the agency, in carrying out its functions, to be able to work with other bodies on matters such as promotions and other day-to-day activities. To constrict the agency in a way that would prevent it from providing those

bodies with materials, personnel or facilities would be a significant inhibitor of the agency's day-to-day performance of its duties and could prove to be extremely bureaucratic if it had to come back and consult each time before it did that.

The Chairperson: I should point out to members that the Committee can table an amendment if we do not agree with your decision not to accept that change. Again, we got 50% of what we wanted.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 13, subject to the Committee being content with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 15 (Functions of RSSO)

The Chairperson: During an earlier meeting of the Committee, members raised an issue that had been highlighted by the Northern Health and Social Services Board. It was suggested that in clause 15(3)(a), in relation to securing the provision of support services, the word "equitable" should be included as well as the words "economic, efficient and effective".

Mr McMaster: We do not propose to insert the word "equitable". The regional business services organisation (RBSO), as we are now proposing to call it, will be bound, as are all newly created bodies, by the legislative requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which requires such bodies to be equitable in all their dealings. However, this clause puts in place arrangements to:

"provide, or secure the provision of, support services to other health and social care bodies"

on demand. Therefore, we felt that it would not only be unfair but difficult for a new organisation to demonstrate that its services were being provided in an equitable way. The services that the RBSO will provide are support services. To ask it to provide those services in an equitable way places a duty on it that we believe it cannot meet.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that those services are already equality proofed?

Mr McMaster: All the RBSO's dealings are equality proofed. It will be called on to deliver services. The bodies that ask the RBSO to deliver services must ensure that their dealings are equality proofed. You are asking an organisation that is acting as an agent to second-guess whether the client body is equitable in its dealings.

Mr Gallagher: Can it be amended later?

The Chairperson: The Committee can propose amendments now or parties can add amendments —

Mr Gallagher: Do you mean in the Chamber?

The Chairperson: Yes, during the Consideration Stage debate. The enunciator informs Members when amendments are being accepted for debates.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 15 agreed to.

Clause 17 (Functions of the Patient and Client Council)

The Chairperson: In the previous consideration sessions, members raised two matters relating to clause 17. First, in clause 17(2)(a), Disability Action proposes that the council should be required to consult the public "in an accessible way". Secondly, Disability Action questioned whether clause 17(4) refers to reasonable adjustments, as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

Mr McMaster: We reject the suggestion that the patient and client council should consult in an accessible way. Although there were considerable discussions with the draftsman about the wording of that subsection, the patient and client council will be bound by the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Therefore, the draftsman concluded that there is no reason to repeat that Act's provisions in this Bill. The Act already stipulates that consultation must be carried out in an accessible way. In carrying out its functions, the council must promote positive attitudes to, and encourage participation by, disabled people. Indeed, it is a drafting principle that existing primary legislation should not be duplicated in new legislation. Therefore, given that the patient and client council will be bound by the 2005 Act, those provisions will not be repeated in this legislation.

The second matter is covered by the same response. Given that the patient and client council is bound by the provisions of the 2005 Act, the council will be required to make reasonable adjustments to meet individuals' requirements.

Ms S Ramsey: I appreciate that; however, whether we are discussing section 75 or the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, when bodies such as Disability Action — which deals day and daily with clients who are directly and indirectly affected by legislation — submits such proposals, is it not worthwhile attempting to reach an agreement that suits everybody? I accept what you said about clause 17(4), but what is the difficulty with inserting "in an accessible way" into clause 17(2)(a)? Although the draftsman says that that is already covered in the 2005 Act, we should not be prevented from including that phrase in the new Bill. When a body such as Disability Action makes a suggestion, I cannot understand why

we must get into a fight about it. Disability Action is not asking for everything to be changed; it is merely making a positive suggestion for the Bill.

Mr McMaster: I understand your point. Although we recently had long discussions about that subsection with the draftsman, he is bound by what he calls “drafting principles”, which prohibit repeating provisions that are elsewhere.

Ms S Ramsey: You may say that you do not accept that; however, we are in a new dispensation, and my concern is that, although we have the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, Disability Action found it necessary to suggest those four words — “in an accessible way” — so it must conclude that the 2005 Act does not go far enough. Whatever the draftsman said, is there any point in getting into a fight about those four words?

The Chairperson: Everyone who has made known their opinion and who wishes additional words to be inserted would, from their perspective, attempt to safeguard that opinion.

Mr Mitchell: Our presumption concerning all the Committee’s proposals was to say yes as much as we could. That is the position from which we began, and we attempted to accept the Committee’s proposals when it was possible for us to do so. I asked the draftsman to go through that specific issue because Claire had raised a couple of matters, and I was conscious that the Department was saying no to two or three issues that were raised by members. Therefore, I pushed it a wee bit.

As Ivan explained about precedents, if the response to individual requirements were to include excerpts from other pieces of legislation, the process would become endless. Every piece of legislation would then replicate every insert that any particular group wished to have included in order to highlight its concerns. The draftsman said that there was no end to that process and that once words are used they must be defined. Therefore, if the phrase “in an accessible way” is used, there is guidance running to several pages on what that means. In the same way, “reasonable adjustment” is defined in several pages of guidance. The difficulties snowball.

I assure the Committee that the Department’s starting point, and the reason that I asked to meet the draftsman, is summed up simply — we should be able to do this. However, his counter-argument was reasonably substantive. I started from the same position as the Committee. That was my wish, and I wanted to include the proposal.

Mr Gallagher: I have some sympathy with Sue, and I have the highest respect for the legal profession. However, the Committee must listen carefully when legal people state that nothing more can be done. Nevertheless, there is no such thing as perfect

legislation. If the Committee accepts this precedent, it may not be possible to tackle a serious problem that might arise in the future. Other than being here for a year, however, I cannot see how the Committee can proceed. It must accept the advice.

Is it possible for the Committee to go back to Disability Action in order to establish why it made that suggestion? The Committee could then pick up on the issue again with the Department later.

The Chairperson: The problem, Tommy, is that the Committee is trying to agree all the clauses today. An individual member may want to make contact with Disability Action and propose an amendment as a party at Consideration Stage. That may be an appropriate course of action. The Committee is tied for time, but that does not prevent members submitting amendments on behalf of their parties.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 17 agreed to.

Clause 19 (Public involvement: consultation schemes)

The Chairperson: At an earlier consideration, members were content with the clause as presently drafted, apart from a question in relation to clause 19(1)(a) about the provision of information in accessible formats.

Mr McMaster: The provision of information in accessible formats involves the same principle as consulting in an accessible manner.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 19 agreed to.

Clause 22 (Public-private partnerships)

The Chairperson: During previous consideration, members expressed concerns about the principle of public-private partnerships (PPP) and referred the clause for further consideration. Members also proposed that the clause should include a reference to ensuring the long-term financial viability and value of any PPP schemes.

Mr McMaster: The clause was considered, and the Department decided not to include such a reference. The thinking behind that was that to provide in legislation a requirement to ensure that the long-term financial viability would be an open-ended requirement and that, although for the foreseeable future — which could be 10, 15, 20 or 25 years — a project could be financially viable, it might subsequently prove not to be. It might be financially viable only as far as one can see. If long-term financial viability were to be included in the legislation, someone could come back after 30 or 40 years and say that a project was not financially viable and question why it was done.

As I said before, the provision is merely enabling the new organisations to use public-private partnerships. Any organisation in Northern Ireland, when procuring anything, is bound by Department of Finance and Personnel guidance, which is taken from Treasury guidance. I will quote to the Committee from a “Dear accounting officer” letter, which is issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel to all organisations:

“The central concern in taking procurement decisions is as always the achievement of VFM. PFI or any other PPP should only be pursued where it delivers VFM, defined as the optimum combination of whole of life cost and quality (or fitness for purpose) of the good or services to meet the user’s requirement; and does not always mean choosing the lowest cost option. In order to ensure that consistently good VFM procurement decisions are made, it is important that VFM assessments should take place as early as possible”.

That applies to any procurement route that is followed. It continues:

“and that Departments ensure there is the flexibility to pursue alternative procurement routes if at any stage PFI/PPP does not offer the best VFM.”

Guidance from the Treasury and the Department of Finance and Personnel, which all Departments must follow, makes it clear that value for money is the starting point, and one must consider it before one can consider not only public-private partnership agreements but any procurement route that they chose to follow.

Therefore, we do not propose to include the requirement for value for money, because it is firmly set out in guidance. Value for money is the beginning and the end of all procurement that is directed by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mrs Hanna: Many people are, at best, sceptical about PPPs. I had to make an attempt to get that provision in somewhere. I accept your point, but you used the word “consider”. Your letter of 22 October 2008 states:

“where a public-private partnership is to be entered into, the body concerned must ensure that option demonstrates best value for money and long-term financial viability.”

PPPs should demonstrate value for money when they are being considered, before a decision is made. The following wording would be preferable:

“When a public-private partnership is to be considered, it must demonstrate value for money.”

The paragraph, as it stands, can be read as though the decision has already been made on the public-private partnership, and it is subsequently demonstrating value for money.

Mr McMaster: After an earlier Committee meeting, we considered that proposal. Having considered it with the draftsman, we decided not to include it.

Mrs Hanna: You will not include any of that?

Mr McMaster: We will not include in the legislation the requirement that one must guarantee that an agreement represents value for money before one enters into it.

Mrs Hanna: I am not saying “guarantee”. The legislation should state that, while considering a PPP, one should demonstrate that it provides best value for money. There is a lot of concern that it does not demonstrate best value for money.

Mr McMaster: The process is such that before anyone can procure anything — a building, goods or whatever — the initial guidance and policy from the Department of Finance and Personnel is that one must consider value for money: that must be the first consideration.

Mrs Hanna: That it taken as read.

Mr McMaster: Yes, and it is important that it is taken as read. This provision will ensure that, if value for money turns out to be down the public-private partnership route, the bodies that we are creating can enter into those partnerships. The first consideration is value for money, and, having considered value for money, any of those bodies can go down several different routes. Once they have said that public-private partnership is the route, the provision simply enables that to happen. Without the provision, none of the bodies that we are creating could enter into a public-private partnership. The provision is not saying that it has to do so; it is saying that it will follow DFP guidance, consider value for money and come up with the preferred route. That preferred route may not be a public-private partnership, and, if so, this provision does not matter. However, if the best value-for-money route were to be a public-private partnership, this provision would allow that to happen.

Mr Gallagher: I note that you are taking best Treasury guidance, and all the rest, which frightens me. However, I understand why you are doing that. If the Treasury guidance is fine and good, how did the car park at the Royal Victoria Hospital end up to be such poor value for money — in fact, to be a real rip-off? That is why we are worried about getting the matter right.

Mr Mitchell: The question is whether one tries to preface what is in the legislation with some kind of explicit reference to the obligations that are laid on public bodies to do what Ivan quoted from the “Dear accounting officer” letter, and we put that explicitly to the draftsman. In one sense, there is no disagreement between us at all in the requirements that are laid down and what Ivan quoted, which are fully consistent with your concerns. The question is whether they can be made more explicit in the legislation.

Mr McMaster: The difficulty with saying that a public-private partnership must be value for money before it is entered into is the fact that it could come back to haunt someone further down the line. Treasury guidance states that one must look as far ahead as possible. However, once the provision that it must guarantee value for money is in legislation, it is there for ever, beyond the period of normal Treasury guidance, which, I imagine, has a limited lifespan — although I am not a Treasury expert. Value for money stretches to a certain point, and one cannot see beyond that point. However, once a provision is inserted into legislation, it remains there for ever or until the legislation is amended to remove that provision.

The steps that are used in the process are important. When one wants to do something that is considered value for money, one must select the options. This provision simply permits one option: it does not advocate that option. The first step is to agree on value for money. We could talk all day about whether the current guidance on assessment of value for money is right or proper, but that is a separate issue altogether. However, there is guidance, and the first step must be to ask what the best value-for-money option is. After that, one can select an option. If an organisation has followed all the necessary steps and a public-private partnership arrangement turns out the best value-for-money option, the clause will simply allow that organisation to enter into an agreement. Without that provision, none of the bodies could enter into an agreement because there would be no legislation permitting them to do so. The clause does not state that they have to enter into a PPP or that they should do it, and neither does it say that they should override all other steps that are taken to try to secure value for money.

Dr Deeny: You talked about PPPs, PFIs and value for money. The important word here is “demonstrate”. There is nothing private about a PPP or a PFI; they involve public money that has to be repaid over a long period. Tommy mentioned the Royal Victoria Hospital car park, and we know about the case of Balmoral High School. Across the water, several health projects were entered into as PPPs, but the public sector had to pay to get out of the contract. Therefore, we are talking about public money not private money. Private groups may provide the initial finance, but they are then paid back, out of the public purse, over 25 years or whatever. Therefore, if a PPP or PFI turns out to be the most cost-effective and best value-for-money option, it is vital that that it is clearly demonstrated to the public why that is the case. I have studied examples of PFIs and PPPs across the water, and I know that the repayments come out of the health budget — and there may be an impact on other services. Therefore, it is very important that whatever option is taken — and let us not forget, clause 22 is not about other options; it is about PPPs — it is clearly demonstrated to the public

that value for money will be achieved. There have been cases in the past in which value for money had clearly not been achieved and in which PPPs have had a very negative impact.

Mr Mitchell: The issue takes us a step away from the legislation. It relates more to the Committee’s concerns about the current guidance that informs the use of PPPs or PFIs. It seems that we are discussing whether the general guidance that is issued throughout the public sector is applicable and whether your concerns can be addressed.

Mr McMaster: I could not agree more that value for money has to be demonstrated, and that is why the Department of Finance and Personnel requires every organisation to carry out a value-for-money assessment on any project into which they enter. That assessment should show what is producing the best value for money and why, and the reasons that other options are being rejected. As I said, that is part of the consideration process, and, by all means, that process should be open, available and clear.

We could argue at length about how those decisions are reached. Dr Deeny is right; those value-for-money assessments must be carried out. However, this provision deals with the point beyond that; it simply allows an organisation that has carried out an assessment that demonstrates that a public-private partnership is the best value for money to enter into that contract and deliver on it. The provision enables delivery; it has nothing at all to do with the assessment that leads up to the decision, although it is absolutely essential that those assessments are carried out. I hope that the Department of Finance and Personnel will exercise control and ensure that value-for-money assessments are carried out correctly. I cannot speak about cases whereby assessments have been wrong. Clause 22 simply enables an organisation to enter into a contract once everyone is satisfied that the best value for money would be delivered through a PPP. It has nothing to do with the assessment that goes before it; that is done long before getting to that stage, if it represents best value for money and if DFP agrees to do that. That has all gone before this stage is reached. Clause 22(1) refers to that as:

“A body to which this section applies may form, or participate in”.

Nothing is mentioned about the assessment prior to that; it is about forming a partnership to deliver on that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 22 agreed to.

Clause 29 (Orders, regulations, guidance and directions)

The Chairperson: At an earlier consideration, members questioned what consideration had been

given to whether regulations under clause 29(2) should be subject to negative resolution or affirmative resolution. Subordinate legislation that is made under different procedures is subject to different levels of scrutiny and approval in the Assembly. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has provided advice to the Committee on that issue, and his paper is tabled today. That paper has been shared with the officials.

Mr McMaster: Further consideration was given to clause 29. Clause 29(1) sets out areas in which it is considered that affirmative resolution should be used. That will allow Orders to propose altering the functions of the new regional agency, the new regional business services organisation or any Order that allows legislation to enable the Bill to come into operation. Those are the areas that are likely to merit the most discussion and that should be formally approved by the Assembly.

Any other regulations and Orders that are proposed will relate more to the day-to-day organisation of the various new bodies, and, therefore, it would be considered to be more appropriate to the negative resolution procedure. As with all subordinate legislation, the Department is required to submit a formal SL1 proposal, by which we must set out the purpose of any set of regulations or any Order, and the reason that those are being made. Those will be scrutinised by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Department considers that clause 29 should remain as drafted.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 29 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (The Regional Health and Social Care Board)

The Chairperson: At an earlier consideration, members were content with schedule 1 as drafted, but the schedule was not formally agreed at the last meeting.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2 (The Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being)

The Chairperson: Schedule 2 is linked to clause 12, which we agreed earlier. At the earlier consideration, the officials accepted that there was an error in paragraph 7(3) of schedule 2, in that the reference to the regional board should read “RAPHSW”.

Mr McMaster: The Department proposes to table an amendment that will insert a new schedule 2 to take on board the change that we suggested. It would amend all references to “RAPHSW” to “regional agency”. The insertion of a new schedule will cut down the number of amendments that would have been required

at Consideration Stage. There are already around 175 references, and we trying to cut that down as much as possible. Inserting a new schedule and changing the references will reduce the number of amendments that must be moved. We propose to insert a new schedule 2 that amends “RAPHSW” to read “regional agency” in every case.

We noted another error. I point that out to ensure the Committee is kept up to date on everything. The provisions of each of the schedules allow for people who are appointed to the boards of those organisations to resign or to be removed by the Department. The provisions, as previously stated, apply only to the chairperson and other non-executive directors. However, as Bernard pointed out, the board of the regional agency will also include some local councillors, who are appointed by the Department. Therefore, the provision must be extended to those people as well.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendments, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 2, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department’s proposed amendments, *agreed to.*

Schedule 5 (Transfer of assets, etc)

The Chairperson: At the earlier consideration, the Department advised that it proposed to make an amendment to paragraph 2(6) of schedule 5 to insert a reference to the transferor organisations.

Mr McMaster: Paragraph 2 of schedule 5 deals with the transfer of employed staff. When that schedule was drafted initially, it stated that certain people should not be involved in the consideration of grievances.

As currently drafted, the paragraph states that a member, or member of staff, of a transferee —the body to which the assets are being transferred — or a member of staff of the Department should not be involved in those grievances. That is correct; no one who has a vested interest should be involved in the consideration of grievances. Unfortunately, the term “transferor” was left out. The transferor is the body from which the assets or liabilities are being transferred. The term was left out because it was thought that all the bodies from which assets are being transferred would be dead in the water by the time the legislation was enacted. However, the provisions allow certain assets to be transferred after 1 April 2009, if needs be. For example, functions for shared services may be transferred at a later date. Therefore, if a body from which the staff are being transferred is still in existence, its staff should not be involved in the consideration of grievances. That brings the Bill

into line with similar provisions in the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. The Department of Finance and Personnel brought that to our attention.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 5, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Schedule 6 (Minor and consequential amendments)

The Chairperson: At the earlier consideration, the Department advised that it proposed to make a technical amendment to paragraph 18(1)(a) of schedule 6.

Mr McMaster: The amendment to paragraph 18(1)(a) of schedule 6 is consequential. It deals with the provision of information as to births and deaths, which we got wrong. Paragraph 18(1)(a) of schedule 6 states:

“for ‘or the Agency’ substitute ‘, the Regional Board or RAPHSW’”.

That is wrong, because those functions are transferring to the regional business services organisation. Therefore, we propose that the wording be amended to reflect that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 6, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, agreed to.

The Chairperson: That concludes the formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill. A draft report to the Assembly on the Committee Stage of the Bill will now be prepared and considered by the Committee at the next meeting.

I thank Martin, Bernard, Ivan and Craig for their attendance today. No doubt, we will see you again.

Mr Mitchell: There have been five or six sessions, and members have had to take in a lot of detail. On behalf of my colleagues, I wish to express my gratitude for the way in which members have conducted themselves and for the care and attention that they have shown throughout. It is very much appreciated.

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 17 October 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Capital Investment Budget

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what percentage of the £1.8 bn capital investment budget for 2008/09 has been committed and to which contracts. (AQO 295/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Seventy-one percent of the 2008/2009 Gross Capital Investment budget has been contractually committed.

The 2008/09 element for commitments on contracts of £10 million and more are detailed below. A total figure is provided for smaller works due to the large number of such projects.

Contracts with financial commitments in 2008/09	Value (£m) committed in 2008/09 to contracts with a value of £10m or over
Alpha PPP (Water) - full capital value scores in budget in the year of service commencement	£110.0
Subscription Agreement between DRD and Northern Ireland Water Limited	£189.1
Roads Service DBFO Package 1	£92.0
New Trains Two	£16.7
Disability Discrimination Compliance New Rail Vision	£4.8
Ballymena to Derry/Londonderry Track Remedial Works	£2.2
Ulsterbus 90 Single Deck Buses	£6.3
Royal Group of Hospitals Critical Care Building	£15.1

Contracts with financial commitments in 2008/09	Value (£m) committed in 2008/09 to contracts with a value of £10m or over
Ulster Hospital Phase A	£16.4
Downe Enhanced Local Hospital	£23.9
Portadown Health and Care Centre	£5.1
Craigavon Crisis Resource Centre, 'Bluestone'	£1.0
Altnagelvin Area Hospital Redevelopment Phase 3.2A	£11.3
Altnagelvin Area Hospital Redevelopment Phase 3.2B	£4.2
Omagh Enhanced Local Hospital Enabling Works	£4.8
Bangor Academy - New school building	£23.8
Holy Cross College, Strabane - New school building	£31.3
Abbey G.S. Newry - New school building	£7.2
Assumption G.S. Ballynahinch - extension & refurbishment	£2.7
De La Salle College, Belfast - New school building	£4.2
Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh - New school building	£8.4
St Colman's College, Newry - extension & refurbishment	£3.3
St Dominic's H.S. Belfast - extension & refurbishment	£5.4
Ulster Museum Refurbishment	£3.1
Waterways Ireland HQ	£2.4
New PRONI HQ	£0.5
Metropolitan Arts Centre	£0.8
2008/09 Financial commitment to contracts with a value of £10m and over.	£596.0m

2008/09 Financial commitment to contracts with a value less than £10m	£684.4m
Total	£1,280.4m

At September 2008 departments have committed 71 % of the opening capital investment budget of £1.8 billion

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many page views its Departmental website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1073/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The number of page views that the OFMDFM website received each month, for the last 12 months, is set out in the table below.

Month	Page Views
October 2007	76,790
November 2007	23,025
December 2007	18,253
January 2008	31,553
February 2008	29,843
March 2008	38,469
April 2008	25,721
May 2008	38,819
June 2008	41,051
July 2008	37,869
August 2008	87,152
September 2008	126,614
Total	575,159

Programme for Government Targets

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it is performing against its Programme for Government targets; and how this performance is measured. (AQW 1143/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Office of the First and deputy First Minister is making good progress against its Programme for Government (PfG) targets.

To date in Year 1 of the PfG, the following has been achieved:

- We have extended the Northern Ireland Bureau's representation to New York to develop further key contacts in the US;
- we have provided additional budget cover 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 have 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 is currently under consideration – and sustained funding for the sustainable development commission;
- through the co-ordination and drafting of the Executive's legislative programme, the Department helped secure the introduction of 17 Bills during the 2008/2009 Assembly Session compared to the 15 which were 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 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.
- OFMDFM's performance against its PfG commitments and targets is measured through a series of Delivery Agreements. These set out:
- the vision espoused by the PSA;

- how progress toward 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 each PSA.

A joint Equality Impact Assessment on the Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy was undertaken at a strategic level. It was agreed that following consultation we would publish our final EQIA which will inform the delivery and review of the PfG, Budget and Investment Strategy over the next three years.

Consultation on the draft PfG, Budget and ISNI was launched on 25 October 2007 and closed on 4 January 2008. The draft EQIA consultation was launched on 30 January 2008 and closed on 23 April 2008. The consultation analysis is being finalised and will be published shortly.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister 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. (AQW 1154/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Our Department does not keep records of carbon usage and, at this time, we have no plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken. Officials from our Sustainable Development Unit have recently contacted colleagues from across the NICS to ascertain what work, if any, has been undertaken to calculate their department's carbon footprints. We are awaiting the findings of these enquiries before progressing this at a strategic level. This will inform our future plans and actions set out in our earlier response to AQW 8469.

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many staff are employed in the Departmental private office; and to detail the cost of employing these staff since May 2007. (AQW 1209/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Private Office within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is unique in that it provides support to 4 Ministers and 8 Special Advisers, and assists the First Minister and deputy

First Minister in their roles both as departmental Ministers and Chairs of the Executive Committee.

At 1 October 2008 there were 27 full-time and 3 part-time staff employed in the Departmental private office. Of these, 11 staff work to the First Minister and Junior Minister Donaldson, 10 to the deputy First Minister and Junior Minister Kelly and 9 in the shared Central Correspondence Unit.

The cost of employing private office staff (including Advisers) during the 2007/08 financial year was £1,646,432 and for the period 1 April 2008 to 31 August 2008 was £706,302.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what funding it has available to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1406/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a policy co-ordination role in relation to children and young people and does not provide grant funding to the voluntary and community sector.

We are advised that Homestart projects fall under the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and understand you have submitted your question to that department.

The Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the importance of the Planning Appeals Commission to the delivery of PfG commitments, what consideration it has given to limiting its independence to the determination of individual cases and hearings. (AQO 566/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Planning Appeals Commission is a Tribunal Body which provides an independent appellate function. It is right and proper that the Commission exercises its independence in its appellate decision making and in reporting on various matters under planning and other legislation, and we have neither given nor intend to give any considerations to limiting this independence.

The Planning Appeals Commission has published its framework for prioritising its workload. Current arrangements do not provide a mechanism for intervention by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Economic Policy Unit

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the role of the Economic Policy Unit in relation to energy policy. (AQO 594/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has the lead responsibility for mainstream energy policy and represents the main government interface with the energy regulator and energy companies.

The primary role of OFMDFM's Economic Policy Unit is to provide economic advice and support for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the delivery of the Programme for Government. It also has the lead role in developing the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy. In the latter context this will involve supporting the progression of renewable energy policy across government in Northern Ireland. In each of these areas it does, of course, take an interest in energy policy.

Engagement with China

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the outcomes achieved following its engagement with the Government of the People's Republic of China. (AQO 598/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are keen to build on the existing links that we have with China. We had the opportunity to discuss cultural exchanges and links in the fields of education and trade most recently when we met the Chinese Consul General on 1st October. We also considered the forthcoming trade mission to China being organised by Invest NI.

Impending Business for the Executive

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on impending business for the Executive. (AQO 602/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A number of papers are being considered for discussion at the Executive meeting scheduled for this Thursday. However, the final agenda for that meeting has not yet been agreed.

Men's Health Seminar

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what

measures junior Minister Kelly proposed to adopt following his attendance at the Men's Health Seminar on 10 September 2008. (AQO 592/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Junior Ministers have agreed to meet representatives from the Men's Project to discuss issues facing men and boys. This is in response to a recent seminar on Men's Health at Parliament Buildings addressed by Junior Minister Kelly on 10 September.

OFMDFM are also responsible for developing an action plan for Men as part of the Gender Equality strategy. A meeting of this nature will give Ministers the opportunity to hear the views of the sector on what are the most important and pressing issues that need to be addressed, within the Action Plan for Men.

Our commitment to tackling gender inequality is outlined in our Programme for Government which commits the Executive to:

- Progress the work of Departments in mainstreaming gender equality into policies, strategies and activities or promote gender specific action measures to tackle identified gender inequalities.

To take this work forward, a Gender Advisory Panel has been established. This will ensure that the views of key stakeholders will help inform future policy initiatives and future action plans will be the result of discussion, debate and review, with men involved at every stage of the process.

We will use all the evidence gathered in the context of this work and OFMDFM's own quantitative and qualitative research, to inform the Men's Action Plan.

The panel meets with OFMDFM officials on a regular basis.

Senior Civil Servants

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many senior civil servants are employed in its Department. (AQO 545/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: At 1 October 2008 there were 25 Senior Civil Service staff employed in our Department.

Children and Young People's Issues

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to demonstrate the priority status it has given to children and young people's issues in its work programme. (AQO 620/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First

Minister does not directly deliver services to children and young people but has a co-ordinating and driving role in the implementation of policy.

The Junior Ministers have been given particular responsibility for children and young people to ensure that their issues remain high on the agenda. This year they have established and Chair the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People which has identified six key priorities and established cross departmental sub groups to take these forward.

One of the key roles of the Junior Ministers and the Sub-Committee is to drive forward the implementation of the 10-year strategy on Children and Young People. To ensure the aims of the strategy are achieved the Junior Ministers asked each department to nominate a Children and Young People's Champion. They have also established a Strategy Planning Review Group (SPRG) the role of which is to provide advice on and to monitor the implementation of the draft Children and Young People's Action Plans. The group includes representatives of statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations and is currently considering a draft strategy action plan for the next three years.

In addition, the Junior Ministers have agreed a personal 12-month work plan in regard to their responsibilities for children and young people. This outlines the actions they will be taking over the year to ensure children's issues remain a priority and includes a programme of engagement with children and young people.

Within this plan is the commitment to develop a safeguarding policy statement which will bind together and integrate existing measures around safeguarding children with new actions and policies. A Play and Leisure Policy Statement has also been developed which aims to improve current play and leisure provision for all children and young people aged 0-18 years. Both policy statements will be brought to the Executive in the near future.

We of course continue to support the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) whose primary function is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. We are also encouraging respect for the views of children and young people through support for and promotion of the Participation Network.

The oral examination by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child took place on 23rd and 24th September 2008. We will be drawing the Committee's concluding observations to the attention of Ministerial colleagues for careful consideration.

Energy and Financial Sector

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give details of their consultations with the energy and financial sector on 24 September 2008; and what measures were discussed at those meetings. (AQO 590/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As part of our series of 'Cost of Living' meetings, we met with both the Utility Regulator and then with representatives of the energy sector on 24 September.

At these meetings we discussed a range of issues of concern to the local energy market and gained further understanding of how our energy sector operates.

The Utility Regulator agreed to send us some further ideas which can be explored to mitigate the hardship caused by increasing energy prices. We also discussed the potential for renewable energy to play a bigger role in the future supply chain.

We met with representative of the banking sector on 21 July 2008. Both meetings were useful in allowing us to hear directly from those most closely involved with the sectors. The agenda for each meeting was wide and provided an opportunity to discuss a wide variety of measures to mitigate the problems of the current economic downturn.

The Historical Enquiries Team

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if any of its Ministers have met with the historical enquiries team of the Police Service of Northern Ireland; and what plans its Ministers has to meet with this team following public interviews by the junior Minister, Mr Gerry Kelly, during the BBC's screening of the programme 'Breakout' on Monday 23 September 2008.

(AQO 593/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: No Ministers from OFMDFM have met with the historical enquiries team of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and there are no such meetings scheduled.

Violence Against Women

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) its objectives in relation to violence against women; and (ii) how it is measuring its progress against these objectives.

(AQO 629/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Violence against women is completely unacceptable and we are committed to eradicating all forms of such

violence. It not only harms women but can also have a devastating impact on children and the wider family unit. Therefore, one of the nine objectives of our Gender Equality Strategy (2006-2016) is to eliminate gender based violence in society. The Strategy will be implemented through mainstreaming and the actions and programmes of all government departments.

Our departmental officials have recently commissioned the views of all Departments on the report 'Making the Grade 2007' and as a result Junior Ministers have agreed to meet representatives of the End Violence Against Women campaign to discuss. This meeting is scheduled for October 21st. Our Ministerial colleagues from the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have all agreed to hold similar meetings.

Our Department and more importantly colleagues in DHSSPS, DSD and the NIO all play key roles in this matter. An interagency steering group was established to examine the issues around prevention, protection and justice, support, and training and development for practitioners. This strategic group feeds into the Inter Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence which was established to ensure the involvement of key service providers, and voluntary and statutory partners. The Group will work together on all the issues associated with domestic violence, sexual violence and abuse. The Junior Ministers represent our Department on that group.

Equality Commission

Lord Browne asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost of the Equality Commission in each of the last five years.

(AQO 595/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The annual outturn figures for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland for each of the last five years are as follows:

2003/04	£6,590k
2004/05	£6,091k
2005/06	£6,996k
2006/07	£6,999k
2007/08	£7,043k

Future Meetings of the Executive

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on dates for future meetings of the Executive. (AQO 603/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The schedule of dates for Executive meetings for the remainder of 2008 is as follows:

- 16 October 2008
- 30 October 2008
- 13 November 2008
- 27 November 2008
- 11 December 2008

This schedule may be altered in response to changing circumstances.

Shackelton Army Barracks

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations it has made to the UK Government to transfer the former Shackelton Army Barracks in Ballykelly to the Executive. (AQO 582/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

We are pressing the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State at every opportunity to have former military sites gifted and our officials are in contact with the Ministry of Defence on a regular basis about this issue.

Regarding Shackelton, we currently have no plans to redevelop Shackelton Barracks, Ballykelly but are aware of some expressed interest from the Department for Social Development, Limavady Council, Road Service and NI Railways in relation to part of the site.

We are also aware that the Ministry of Defence recently vacated the site on 30 June 2008 and are currently developing a planning brief for the site.

It is important to stress that our already stretched budgets make no allowance for the purchase or redevelopment of any of the former military sites, including Shackelton.

We will continue to press the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to have further sites gifted and will report any progress to the Assembly.

International Offices

Mr T Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to establish its international offices in addition to Brussels, Washington D.C., and New York. (AQO 551/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Work has commenced to consider the options for representation in the Far East. The Executive's Programme for Government details 23 Public Service Agreements (PSAs) in support of the plans and priorities for 2008-2011. PSA 1 – Productivity Growth, includes a target to extend the Northern Ireland Bureau's representation to New York and the Far East. A Bureau Manager has been appointed to a New York Office.

Strategic Investment Board

Mr Newton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the role of the Strategic Investment Board in delivering major infrastructure projects. (AQO 568/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive's Investment Strategy approved by the Assembly in January, is the largest ever commitment to infrastructure development in Northern Ireland. By 2018 we plan to invest approaching £20bn to tackle the legacy of decades of under-investment we inherited.

This determined action will put in place the assets required to support high quality public service, regenerate communities, and enhance the economic competitiveness essential to sustain jobs and prosperity.

Just over 5 years ago infrastructure investment was less than £1bn per annum. Last year it amounted to almost £1.4bn and it is planned to reach £2bn per annum by the end of this Budget period. This is the measure of recent success and our ambition to go further.

But delivering the Investment Strategy involves more than simply spending the money. Our key commitments must be delivered on time, to a high quality standard, and at value for money. It also means investing in projects that offer a good return.

Expectations are high but we must not underestimate the challenges. We are now facing global financial and economic difficulties. Our local construction industry in particular is looking to our investment programme to support local jobs through difficult times ahead – and provide opportunities for more apprenticeships and training. We are determined to ensure that the Investment Strategy helps meet these calls.

SIB performs a vital role in the development, monitoring and communication of our Investment Strategy and in moving forward our key infrastructure investment programmes. It is helping departments to deliver major projects across the full spectrum of services including health care, the environment, schools and colleges, roads, water, waste and public administration.

SIB provides expert commercial, legal and project delivery advice to departments – drawing on advisers' extensive experience of major infrastructure

procurements. This advice is helping us to ensure that the best deal is obtained for the public purse and that risks are identified and appropriately managed.

We recently met with SIB's Chairman and Chief Executive to discuss the progress being made in implementing the Investment Strategy and to consider what additional steps could be taken to bring forward capital projects. We will continue to meet with SIB regularly and we will direct it to work with departments to address concerns being expressed about the pace of delivery.

At present, SIB is actively supporting 26 departmental programmes and projects with an estimated capital value in excess of £3bn. These include:

- advising on the procurement and delivery of the new acute hospital in the South West;
- helping to implement the BELB Strategic Partnership to redevelop our school buildings in Belfast, and with the wider Schools Modernisation programme.
- advising on the best procurement strategy to deliver the A5 and A8 major roads schemes on time and to budget;
- progressing the Workplace 2010 initiative, as part of the wider NICS reform;
- developing proposals for a first class tourism product in the Titanic Quarter;
- evaluating how best to take forward the recommendations from the Capital Realisations Taskforce to improve asset management across the public sector.

SIB also performs a valuable role in liaising with private sector, in particular with the construction industry and CBI, and we expect this to continue.

We believe that SIB's contribution to helping the Executive is essential in delivering infrastructure investment to improve public services, and supporting the local economy.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rivers Agency

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps the Rivers Agency is taking to prevent future flooding of (i) Masareene Street, Antrim; and (ii) the Meadowlands area, Toomebridge. (AQW 953/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): (i) Massareene Street in Antrim lies within the floodplain of the Six Mile Water which is a designated watercourse maintained

by Rivers Agency to ensure the free flow of water. The flood 16/17 August 2008 was an extreme event which affected many locations on the Six Milewater and I fully understand the concerns of those who suffered the devastating impacts of it. A comprehensive review of the flood risk to Antrim from the Six Mile Water is needed to determine the scope and viability of any remedial action. To this end Rivers Agency is taking forward the necessary investigations.

(ii) The Meadowlands area in Toomebridge is affected by the Moyola and Annahorish Rivers. As indicated in (i) the Rivers Agency is currently carrying out investigations into all recorded incidents of watercourse related flooding experienced on 16 and 17 August 2008 to determine the scope for and viability of remedial action.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she will take to ensure that agricultural businesses will be fully considered within the Review of Public Administration and economic development in councils. (AQW 956/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I assume the member is referring to the work of Councils in the current NIRD. Under Axis 3 of the new Rural Development Programme, Seven Local Action Groups were ratified in July of this year. Each in conjunction with its respective council joint committee developed a local rural development strategy which set out their local priorities. All 7 strategies were submitted, within a competitive process, to my department on 31st July as applications for rural development funding. The strategies were an assessment of local need and proposals on how these needs could be addressed by the six measures under the programme Axis. Under measure '3.1 diversifying into non agricultural activities' we have £20 million ring fenced for farmers and members of farmer families wishing 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 again this measure has a budget of £20 million. All of the strategies we have received have included interventions for agricultural businesses. Over and above this Axis 1 of the RDP provides additional measures to assist agriculture businesses examine the options available to them for, for example, Farm Family Options which might include re-skilling and assessing how their businesses can be improved.

Money Returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much money her Department returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel on 31 March 2008. (AQW 957/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The process for "returning" money to the Department of Finance and Personnel is via the Provisional Outturn exercise which is conducted following the end of each financial year. The 2007/08 DARD Net Provisional Outturn position was £273.24m compared to a Final Budget Control Total of £304.90m, which represents a total Net departmental expenditure limit underspend of £31.66m (10.38%).

This can be broken down into the two main areas of expenditure: Current and Capital.

The Current expenditure underspend was £8.2m (3.4%). Of this, £1.0m was on Administration; £1.9m was in respect of a reduction in pension liabilities; and we earned £1.4m more income than we had budgeted for.

A further £3.7m was in respect of Modulation Match Funding which over the past number of years was carried forward under End of Year Flexibility arrangements to help fund the NI Rural Development Programme until 2013. These EYF arrangements have since changed and carry forward of this £3.7m underspend into 2008/09 was not granted.

The Capital and Capital Grant underspend is £23.5m (34.6%). Some £14.5m was in respect of the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS) and to a degree this reflected the demand led nature of Capital Grant schemes. Similarly, expenditure fell short on other demand led Capital Grants – the Integrated Development Funds (£3.7m) and rural development schemes (£1.5m).

We were also slower to spend Capital than we had planned with an underspend of £3.3m on a small number of projects.

The Department continues to endeavour to improve its monitoring and control processes and I expect to report a better position at the end of this financial year.

Mussel Fishermen

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with mussel fishermen in relation to the closure of fishing grounds in Belfast Lough, from Greys Point to Blackhead. (AQW 958/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The proposal to close Belfast Lough to

fishing with mobile gear was subject to a full public consultation exercise in July 2007. The ban on the use of mobile gear was supported by aquaculture producers licensed by the Department for the bottom culture of mussels on extensive sites within the proposed closed area but opposed by the NI Fish Producers Organisation representing sea fishermen.

Post consultation the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee asked my Department to talk again with both sides with a view to putting in place an arrangement that would permit sea fishermen to access the Lough, primarily, to target cockles.

It was subsequently agreed that the Department would develop a permit scheme to allow access to sea fishermen under certain conditions. I intend to bring forward proposals for consultation on this matter in spring 2009.

In the meantime the Department has worked closely with industry to carry out environmental assessments to permit an experimental small scale dredge fishery for cockles. This is limited to two vessels but the results will inform future decisions on permitting a larger scale cockle fishery.

Badger Culls

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with her counterparts in (i) the Republic of Ireland and (ii) other regions of the United Kingdom, in relation to badger culls and their use in preventing the spread of tuberculosis. (AQW 960/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I talk to my Ministerial counterparts in the South and in Britain about a range of animal health issues. On 19 September 2008, I discussed the use of badger removal with my Ministerial counterpart in the South as part of their overall approach to preventing the spread of tuberculosis.

Flooding in Antrim Town

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to prevent a recurrence of the flooding in Antrim town. (AQW 962/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Antrim town lies within the catchment of the Six Mile Water. The Six Mile Water is a designated watercourse maintained by Rivers Agency to ensure free flow. The flooding on 16/17 August 2008 arose from exceptional rainfall which overwhelmed existing systems.

In the light of this there is need for a comprehensive study of the protection provided by existing defences to Antrim town to determine the scope and viability of any remedial action. I have therefore tasked Rivers Agency to take forward the necessary investigations.

Animal Welfare

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department plans to amend the Animals Welfare Act to make it illegal for people to keep animals in a poor condition instead of having to prove the animals are being mistreated. (AQW 972/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is already a requirement under animal welfare legislation that anyone who is responsible for a farmed animal must take all reasonable steps to ensure that the animal's needs are met. This principle is also set out in the NI Codes of Recommendation for the Welfare of Livestock, which are published by DARD, and which aim to encourage all those who care for farm animals to follow the highest level of husbandry.

However, I recognise that legislation does not provide the same protection to non farm animals. It may be possible to identify animals which are being cared for inadequately and in some cases this inadequate care may lead to suffering if it continues. However, action can only be taken once cruelty or unnecessary suffering has occurred.

As I indicated in a previous answer on 11 October 2007 with respect to other animal welfare issues, my Department consulted on proposals for new legislation in late 2006. The consultation included a proposal that those who are responsible for animals should be required to ensure that all the animals' physical needs are catered for.

As the 2006 consultation 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 met a number of key stakeholders to hear their concerns at first hand, and the issue of the duty of animal keepers to provide adequate care for their animals was raised during some of these meetings.

The specific provisions of any new legislation that I bring forward will depend on detailed consideration of the responses to the 2006 consultation and on the outcome of my meetings with stakeholders. I also wish to take note of legislative developments in the South and to consider lessons learned in Britain, where new legislation was introduced last year.

However, it is clear that all animal owners should be required to take all reasonable steps to prevent unnecessary suffering from happening.

Animal Welfare

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how often her officials visit open farms to check on animal welfare. (AQW 974/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has no statutory provision to inspect “open farms” and does not routinely keep records of farms that are open to members of the public. These farms are treated in the same way as other farms for the purposes of checks on animal welfare along with other cross compliance checks and disease testing.

Prevention of Future Flooding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she 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 978/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since the severe flooding in August Rivers Agency staff have been carrying out emergency repairs to flood defences and attending site meetings with the many affected residents and investigating the various flooding incidents. The latter is essential to supplement the detailed information the Agency is gathering. This enables a formal evaluation of the problem and the identification of action where possible.

It is hoped to resolve some of the problems by relieving blockages in watercourses or undertaking minor works. The Agency is addressing these in co-operation with the other organisations with drainage responsibilities, including NI Water and Roads Service.

Where flooding was severe, such as in Antrim, Banbridge and Beragh, Newcastle, potential solutions will require detailed investigation and consideration. Where appropriate, comprehensive reviews will be made of the protection offered by existing defences that were overwhelmed by the extreme events of August 2008.

It is not possible to guarantee immunity from flooding, however the Agency is committed to the reduction of flood risk in the North. Due to the scale of the August 2008 flooding, the Agency will also consider a bid for additional resources to accelerate the progress of post-flood recovery and viable flood alleviation schemes.

Prevention of Future Flooding

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide details of houses that have been built on flood plains in (i) Lagan Valley; and (ii) Northern Ireland; and what plans her Department has to redress this situation in the event of future flooding. (AQW 1024/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As part of the preparatory work for the release of the Strategic Flood Map, Rivers Agency have carried out analyses of the number of properties at risk of flooding from watercourses and the sea. Early analyses, which are subject to refinement when flood maps are published, indicate that there are approximately 63,000 properties identified as being in the natural flood plain across the North. Following the extreme event of 16 and 17 August 2008 Rivers Agency are currently carrying out investigations into the causes of the flooding and the viability of possible options to reduce the flood risk for the affected areas. In the longer term, in line with the requirements of the EU Floods Directive Rivers Agency intend to produce more detailed flood maps where areas are at significant risk. Detailed flood risk management plans will then be produced for these areas by the EU deadline of December 2015.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what were the full details of the agreement that allowed the present owner to obtain lake rights for the Clay Lakes at Shrigley; and (ii) if there was a separate agreement with the private business owners. (AQW 1082/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Lake rights for the Clay Lakes at Shrigley are associated with private land and property transactions and are a matter of private law. Such details may be usually obtained by search in the Land Registry Division of Land and Property Services.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for the details of any agreement made with United Chrome Tanners in Shrigley about the Clay Lakes. (AQW 1083/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The United Chrome Tanners relied on abstraction of water from the Clay Lakes for their tannery operation. The Lakes are affected by a minor watercourse known as the Dibney Upper which was

designated for maintenance by the then Ministry of Agriculture. When undertaking a drainage scheme on the Dibney River the Ministry entered into a historic agreement with the Tannery, as landowners, in August 1969, whereby post scheme the Tannery would continue to be able to draw the necessary levels of water from the lakes, but would be responsible for maintaining the water levels below a maximum level of 66.0 feet Ordnance Datum Poolbeg. United Chrome Tanners no longer operate at the site and transfer of obligations on water level maintenance depends on private contractual arrangements with their successors.

Drainage on Hollybank Road

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to improve the drainage on Hollybank Road, Templepatrick, to prevent a recurrence of flooding to property. (AQO 565/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Properties on the Hollybank Road are affected by a designated watercourse, the Four Mile Burn, which flows to the rear of the houses.

The extreme rainfall experienced locally during August overwhelmed the existing flood defences causing flooding to a number of houses.

Rivers Agency is presently assessing and repairing damage to defences and removing shoals and is also further investigating the existing flood defences with a view to reducing flood risk. Any measures identified would be subject to cost benefit analysis and, if viable, these would be placed in the Agency's programme along with other competing priorities.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the decision to replace the sluice gates at the Clea lakes, Shrigley, was postponed. (AQW 1122/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Responsibility for maintenance and / or replacement of sluice gates at Clea Lakes, Shrigley, rests with Dunbia, the current landowners. Work is ongoing to legally transfer responsibility for water level maintenance to Rivers Agency.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the water level at the Clea lakes in Shrigley were not maintained at the agreed

level of 66 inches above sea level; and why checks on the water level were not completed. (AQW 1146/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Responsibility for maintenance of the water level at Clea lakes, Shrigley, rests with the current landowners, Dunbia. Checks on water level are a matter for Dunbia.

It should be noted, however, that it is not possible to guarantee a minimum level for the lakes as this is dependant on weather conditions.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development who is responsible for controlling and maintaining the water levels at the Clea lakes in Shrigley. (AQW 1147/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Responsibility for water level management at Clea Lakes in Shrigley rests with the current private landowners Dunbia (formerly known as Dungannon Meats). Work is ongoing to legally transfer responsibility to Rivers Agency for drainage purposes.

Fisheries Bill

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she intends to bring forward a Fisheries Bill. (AQW 1148/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The need for and scope of any future Fisheries Bill is still being considered. The Marine Bill being brought forward by Defra contains provisions for new enforcement powers and powers to introduce administrative penalties for domestic fisheries offences, and powers to improve the licensing and management of fisheries. I believe it is important that there is consistency between regulation and control regimes and fishermen here are treated no differently in Britain or in the rest of Ireland.

My Department will bring forward appropriate legislation to ensure that is the case and will wish to consult with other Fisheries Administrations before firm proposals are made.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many page views her Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1165/09)

THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT:

Month/Year	Page Views	Month/Year	Page Views
Sep 2008	380,007	Mar 2008	322,958
Aug 2008	386,630	Feb 2008	324,089
Jul 2008	294,054	Jan 2008	413,806
Jun 2008	405,997	Dec 2007	228,567
May 2008	358,280	Nov 2007	283,854
Apr 2008	333,454	Oct 2007	415,981

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department has the power to transfer the water rights at the Clea lakes, Shrigley to private business other than United Chrome Tanners; and if so, why no legal stipulation is in place to prevent these rights being passed on when the company denies lakeside dwellers and farmers their water rights. (AQW 1173/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has no powers in relation to the transfer of water rights at the Clea Lakes, Shrigley. Water rights are generally covered in contractual arrangements in private property transactions and outside the drainage remit of the Rivers Agency. The Agency has no responsibility for maintenance of water levels at the Clea Lakes or access to water rights.

Department Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the projects her Department has successfully completed in the North Down constituency, in the last 12 months. (AQW 1176/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table lists successful projects for the period of 6 October 2007 to 6 October 2008.

Name of Project	Brief description of Project
Successful Projects Completed by Forest Service	
Deer Management	Forest Service established a Deer Management Group within the Clondeboy Forest area, in liaison with local land owners.
Maintenance of recreation facilities	Forest Service has carried out routine maintenance of recreation facilities at Ballysallagh Forest.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to ensure that cattle do not wander across the Clea lakes, Shrigley, and onto the main road, when the water level has receded. (AQW 1177/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is responsible for enforcing compliance with the provisions of the Tuberculosis Control Order (NI) 1999 and the Brucellosis Control Order (NI) 2004 as regards the separation of animals for disease control purposes. These provisions include the requirement that the keeper of a herd prevents herd contact with animals on adjoining land, and prevents the herd from straying, by maintaining fences. These provisions only apply where there is deemed to be a Tuberculosis or Brucellosis disease control risk. My Department has no responsibility to take action as regards wandering cattle, except where it is a case of preventing the spread of Tuberculosis or Brucellosis.

The general issue of cattle wandering onto main roads is one of civil liability. The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for amending The Animals (NI) Order 1976, which sets out the liability rules governing the responsibility of the owner of an animal for any damage it may cause.

The Department of Finance and Personnel has advised that an owner of an animal is under a duty of care to prevent damage from animals straying onto the public highway. However, where damage is caused by an animal straying from unfenced land onto a public road, the owner of the animal will not have breached his duty of care if the land is situated in an area where fencing is not customary and the owner had a right to place the animals on that land.

Equality Impact Assessment

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to update the progress of the Equality Impact Assessment on the DARD Direct proposals and (ii) when an announcement regarding location is likely to be made. (AQW 1349/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) The formal consultation phase of the EQIA was completed on 5th September 2008. The Department received 29 responses during the consultation phase. The key issues arising from the consultation were accessibility of offices, for both staff and customers; quality and flexibility of service; and disruption to staff and customers. The Department is 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.

- (ii) No decisions will be made on the number and locations of DARD Direct offices until all feedback, including from the ARD Committee, has been carefully considered.

Damage Caused by Flooding

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide the provisional cost estimates of damage caused by flooding on 16 August 2008, to the farming industry. (AQW 1518/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Although the final assessment is not yet available, the current cost estimate of damage is in the order of £670,000. This represents losses in respect of potatoes of £466, 000, cereals of £144,000 and vegetables of £60,000. These figures are based on input costs.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Ulster Scots Groups

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the Ulster Scots groups funded by his Department; and (ii) the amount of funding provided to Ulster-Scots groups in the Mid-Ulster constituency over the past 3 years. (AQW 995/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): The only Ulster-Scots Group funded directly by my Department is the Ulster-Scots Agency, which along with Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency, comprises the North/South Language Body.

The payments made by the Ulster-Scots Agency are not held by specific constituency area; however the Agency has endeavoured to list those groups in the Mid-Ulster constituency who have received funding between 2006 and 2008. Also shown in the tables below are payments made by the Arts Council to Ulster-Scots Groups in the Mid-Ulster constituency between 2006 and 2008.

ULSTER-SCOTS AGENCY

Year	Detail	Award
2008	Aughrim Fife & Lambeg Drumming Club	£1,600.00
	Ballinacross Accordion Band	£1,200.00
	Centre for Migration Studies	£2,000.00
	Cranny Cultural & Community Group	£2,150.00
	Derganagh Training & Development Association	£250.00
	Desertmartin Accordion Band	£1,200.00
	Magherafelt Highland & Country Dancing Group	£3,715.50
	Salterstown Flute Band	£1,800.00
	Sandholes Accordion Band	£1,672.50
	Dunamoney Community Group	£2,560.00
	South Londonderry Ulster Scots Association	£1,200.00
	Kilcronaghan Community Association	£2,140.00
2007	Maghera Sons of William Flute Band	£1,400.00
	South Londonderry Ulster Scots Association	£4,725.00
	Salterstown Flute Band	£900.00
	Ballymoughan Flute Band	£1,600.00
	Cranny Cultural and Community Group	£4,500.00
	Magargy Cultural & Community Group	£500.00
2006	Moree Community Association	£250.00
	Ulster-Scots Dance Alliance	£35,000.00
	South Londonderry Ulster-Scots Association	£1,673.25
	Dunamoney Flute Band	£250.00
	Cranny Cultural & Community Group	£1,600.00
	Pomeroy Historical Society	£1,855.00
	Newmills Lambeg Drumming Club	£2,430.00
	Gortagilly Musical Society	£1,770.00
	Drumnaglough Flute Band	£1,833.00
	Magherafelt Highland & Country Dance Group	£3,977.37

THE ARTS COUNCIL

07/08	Cranny Pipe Band & Gortagilly Musical Society	£5,000
06/07	Cranny Pipe Band & Gortagilly Musical Society	£3,000
05/06		NIL

Sports Grounds

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants are available to (i) create; and (ii) improve sports grounds, in preparation for the 2012 Olympics. (AQW 1034/09)

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. SNI is currently operating and planning a number of Exchequer and Lottery programmes to which sports clubs and the owners of sports grounds, including football grounds, may apply. These presently include the Awards for All and Places for Sport: Surfaces programmes but other programmes are likely to come on stream. Details of these can be found in due course on the SNI website, www.sportni.net.

Grants Available to Sports Clubs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants are available to sports clubs associated with the 2012 Olympics. (AQW 1035/09)

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. SNI is currently operating and planning a number of Exchequer and Lottery programmes to which sports clubs and the owners of sports grounds, including football grounds, may apply. These presently include the Awards for All and Places for Sport: Surfaces programmes but other programmes are likely to come on stream. Details of these can be found in due course on the SNI website, www.sportni.net.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many page views his Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1074/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The table below lists the number of website page views received by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's website for each month during the past 12 months.

This report was generated by Web Trends 8, Version: 8.0d, Build: 28635. Thursday, 2 October 2008 10:57:56

Page Views Trend	
Time Interval	Page Views
October 2007	47,738
November 2007	22,935

Page Views Trend	
Time Interval	Page Views
December 2007	29,758
January 2008	33,093
February 2008	33,567
March 2008	43,534
April 2008	44,406
May 2008	53,047
June 2008	44,024
July 2008	25,134
August 2008	36,024
September 2008	37,975
1st Oct – 2nd Oct 2008	1,538

Money Returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money his Department returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel on 31 March 2008. (AQW 1079/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: For the financial year 2007-08, the Estimate for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure was £138,500,000 against an actual expenditure of £130,436,000. The resulting under spend for the Department was £8,064,000. Further details can be found in the Department's 2007-08 Resource Accounts which were laid on 4 July 2008.

Sports Grounds

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants are available from the Sports Council for new and existing football and other sports grounds,. (AQW 1088/09)

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. SNI is currently operating and planning a number of Exchequer and Lottery programmes to which sports clubs and the owners of sports grounds, including football grounds, may apply. These presently include the Awards for All and Places for Sport: Surfaces programmes but other programmes are likely to come on stream. Details of these can be found in due course on the SNI website, www.sportni.net.

An Gaeláras Centre

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the (i) revenue; and (ii) project funding, awarded to the An Gaeláras Centre in Derry/Londonderry, in each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 1090/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The An Gaeláras Centre has received revenue and project funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Foras na Gaeilge and project funding administered by Inland Waterways and Inland Fisheries Branch in DCAL. Funding provided by each organisation over the last three years is set out in the tables below.

FORAS NA GAEILGE

Year	Revenue (£)
2008	99,081 (amount paid to 30 September 2008)
2007	117,962
2006	115,017

ARTS COUNCIL

Year	(Exchequer) Revenue (£)	Lottery (£)
2007/08	44,550	
2006/07	44,550	45,000 (Access project)
2005/06	26,000	

IWIF

Year	Project Costs (£)
2006	65,134.22

An Gaeláras Centre

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the funding provided for the new An Gaeláras building in Derry/Londonderry; (ii) the sources of the funding; and (iii) the total cost of the project.
(AQW 1092/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The total cost of the An Gaeláras building is £3.43m. A range of funders are providing funding for the building as detailed below:

Funder	Amount allocated	Amount paid to date
An Gaeláras	£272k	0
Ilex (Integrated Development Fund)	£500k	£220,607

Funder	Amount allocated	Amount paid to date
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	£650k	0
Foras na Gaeilge	£600k	£275,561
International Fund for Ireland	£353k	£141,200
The Local Strategy Partnership for Derry City Council Area	£330k	£330,000
Dept. of Foreign Affairs (ROI)	£65k	0
Ulster Community Investment Trust	£100k	£100,000
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure North West Cultural Challenge Fund	£363k	£310,908
Department of Social Development	£200k	£160,000
Total	£3.43m	£1,538,276

Midnight Soccer Initiatives

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support is available from his Department for midnight soccer initiatives.
(AQW 1099/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland and the distribution of funding. SNI is currently operating a number of Exchequer and Lottery programmes to which the organisers of midnight soccer may apply. These include the Awards for All and Sport in out Community programmes.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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.
(AQW 1106/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not currently keep records of carbon usage nor has the Department currently any plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long journey is undertaken.

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure 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 1138/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have not had any engagements with Professor Bain in relation to the review of the location of public-sector jobs.

Events Unit

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to list the events that have been funded since the inception of the Events Unit in the Department; and (ii) the dates the grants were awarded. (AQW 1160/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since the inception of the Events Unit, the Department has approved or is appraising applications from the following events.

Event Name	Fund	Date of Decision to Award	Letter of Offer Issued
Aquarama Carrickfergus Incorporating Annual Sea Cadet Corps National Sailing Regatta 2008	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Atlantic Tall Ships Challenge 2009	MEF	Subject to economic appraisal	TBA
August Feile - West Belfast Festival 2008	MEF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Blues on the Bay 2008	EGF	05-03-08	14-03-08
European FIM Trials 2008	MEF	05-03-08	14-03-08
Garden Show Ireland 2008	EGF	05-03-08	14-03-08
Guinness Folk Festival 2008	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Hillsborough International Oyster Festival 2008	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
International Indoor Athletics 2009	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Kennedy International North West 200 - 2008	MEF	Subject to economic appraisal	TBA
Lough Neagh Fest	EGF	27-08-08	01-09-08
Magner's Big Tickle Comedy Festival 2008	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08

Event Name	Fund	Date of Decision to Award	Letter of Offer Issued
Milk Cup International Youth Football Tournament 2008	MEF	05-03-08	19-03-08
NI Dance Awards 2008	EGF	23-05-08	27-05-08
Northern Ireland International Air Show 2008	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Out to Lunch 2009	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Rally Ireland	MEF	17-09-08	03-10-08
Trans/Urban Arts Academy 2008	EGF	18-06-08	25-06-08
Ulster Grand Prix Bike Week 2008	MEF	18-06-08	25-06-08
University of Ulster Foyle Cup Tournament 2008	MEF	27-05-08	27-05-08
World Indoor Bowling Championship	EGF	27-08-08	03-09-08
World Junior & Cadet Fencing Championships 2009	MEF	Subject to economic appraisal	TBA

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many staff are employed in his Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1292/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A total of 5 staff are employed in the DCAL Departmental Private Office. This figure excludes the Minister's Special Advisor.

The annual costs of employing the staff during the financial years 2007/2008 and 2008/09 to date (1 April to 30 September 2008) are:

2007/08	£123,750
2008/09	£64,216

TV Licences

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will make representations to the BBC calling for an exemption from paying the TV Licence for people registered as blind. (AQW 1303/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for policy on the television licence fee in the UK. The issue of concessions was fully addressed

in the BBC Charter review, which completed in 2006. Respondents to the Charter review consultations put forward a very wide range of groups which they felt merited special concessions but there was little consensus as to who should have concessions, the criteria on which they should be allocated or how they should be funded. The conclusion was that there should be no changes to the existing concessions and there are no plans to re-open the issue. Any representation would therefore not be appropriate at this point in time.

Football Pitch Improvements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what money will be available for football pitch improvements for (i) councils; (ii) community groups; (iii) football clubs; (iv) youth clubs; and (v) junior teams, in this financial year. (AQW 1315/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. SNI is currently operating an Exchequer programme called Places for Sport: Surfaces which focuses on providing pitches and sports surfaces and is open to voluntary sports clubs, community associations, education boards, governing bodies, charities, local authorities and other statutory bodies. The programme has a budget for this financial year of £1.5 million and the maximum award for each project is up to £245,000 towards construction costs.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding is available from his Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1344/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department does not directly provide grant funding to organisations. The Department will, through its Arms Length Bodies, provide advice and support to any organisation considering an application for funding.

Sport NI currently has the following programmes that may be appropriate to Home Start: Awards for All, Places for Sport and Active Communities.

The Member should note that Arts Council programmes offer a premium payment within their grants to cover costs of childcare and crèche facilities which enables organisations to run programmes which will assist parents to participate in the arts.

NI Events Company

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline when his Department will complete the investigation into the NI Events company. (AQO 662/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Investigations carried out by KPMG, on behalf of the Department, into how the financial deficit at the Northern Ireland Events Company arose were completed in April 2008. The former Minister made a statement to the Assembly on 3rd June 2008 on the findings of KPMG Report.

These investigations have raised serious questions in relation to how the affairs of the Company were conducted. The report into these investigations contains 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 in the process of selecting and appointing inspectors.

I am unable, at this time, to state when these further investigations will be completed.

Performer Development Centres

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department and Sport NI will consider designating a number of facilities in Co. Tyrone as performer development centres to assist local athletes. (AQO 667/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) has sought expressions of interest for establishing Performer Development Centres as part of a pilot programme aimed at addressing short-term sport science and sports medicine support to developing athletes throughout Northern Ireland. To date SNI has considered four proposals, two of which have already been successful. SNI will continue to seek further expressions of interest to facilitate geographical spread of development centres.

Elite Facilities Programme

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the remaining budget for the Elite Facilities Programme. (AQO 548/09)

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.

A competition is currently underway and the number of potential projects cannot be identified until the Outline Business Cases have been assessed.

The 2008/2011 Budget provides circa £145m for all sport including £111.6m for all sports capital projects. The amount that will be available for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme will be determined once the Outline Business Cases have been assessed, the number of priority projects have been identified and the consequential spending profile considered.

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.

Training Camps

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the total number; and (ii) the location, of sports facilities that will be used as training camps by athletes training for the 2012 Paralympic Games, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQO 660/09)

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.

The location of the eight venues broken down by parliamentary constituency, are as follows:-

- 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.

Capital Projects

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what proportion of the 2008-11 sports budget has been allocated to capital projects. (AQO 575/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Budget 2008/2011 provided a total of £145.3 million for Sport. £111.6 million of this has been allocated for all sports capital projects. This amounts to 76.8% of the Sport budget.

Community Sports

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding available for community sports infrastructure in the financial year 2008/09. (AQO 657/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is currently developing a number of programmes which will help address the need for new, improved and shared sports facilities including new investment in places for sport in communities and training of coaches and leaders in communities and clubs across Northern Ireland.

SNI has advised that in the financial year 2008/09 it is likely to achieve spend of £6.35m under the Building Sport programme and £536,250 under the Elite Facilities Programme. In addition to this, SNI is currently reviewing its capital budget to ensure funding is available for the recently launched Places for Sport programme.

World Police and Fire Games

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when a decision will be taken on who will deliver the World Police and Fire Games in 2013. (AQO 599/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: BDO Stoy Hayward has been commissioned to prepare a Business Case, which will include recommendations on the most appropriate delivery mechanism for the 2013 Games. Once the Business Case has been submitted to the Department and reviewed I will then be in a position to make a recommendation on how best the Games can be delivered.

North-South Ministerial Council

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the outcomes of the North-South Ministerial Council meeting in waterway sectoral format held on 4 July 2008. (AQO 665/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I refer the member to the Statement I made to the Assembly on 23rd September on this matter.

Ulster Scots Agency

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail efforts being made by his Department to improve governance and management systems in the Ulster Scots Agency. (AQO 659/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the Sponsor Departments of the North/South Language Body have agreed with the Ulster-Scots Agency to a review of its procedures and processes being carried out along with a structural review to enable its Corporate Governance to be strengthened and improved.

Ulster Museum

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how the staff of the Ulster Museum have been employed during the period in which it has been closed. (AQO 558/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Staff from the Ulster Museum have been engaged on a range of activities central to the success of the re-furbishment project. Key aspects of this work include decanting more than 800,000 objects in the collections to suitable off-site storage facilities which included their safe transport and documentation; undertaking an extensive outreach programme taking the Ulster Museum's collections to schools, libraries and regional museums across Northern Ireland; planning new interpretation approaches and gallery layouts for the refurbished museum and in the coming months preparing for the recant of the collections for the reopening in the summer of 2009.

Paralympic Games in Beijing

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to honour the Northern Ireland athletes who competed with such distinction at the Paralympic Games in Beijing. (AQO 557/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I hosted a reception in Parliament Buildings on Monday 6th October 2008 to recognise the achievements of all Northern Ireland athletes who participated in the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Beijing.

Public Record Office

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to extend the evening and weekend opening hours of the Public Record Office to improve public access. (AQO 561/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There are currently no plans to extend the present opening hours of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in advance of its move to new accommodation.

EDUCATION

Revised Curriculum

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education, given the uncertainty over the 11-plus test, what measures are being put in place to ensure effective delivery of the Revised Curriculum. (AQW 641/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): There is no uncertainty over the 11-plus Transfer Test. I have been very clear that the Transfer Test to be held this November will be the last Transfer Test. 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. 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.

The Education and Training Inspectorate conducts inspections in schools and is an independent means of reporting any occasions of the statutory curriculum being distorted by tests for the purposes of selection.

Chuir mé in iúl go soiléir nár mhian liom go mbeadh drochthionchar ag na socrúithe aistrithe ar an churaclam athbhreithnithe. Éilítear ar gach scoil an curaclam reachtúil agus socrúithe gaolmhara measúnaithe agus tuairiscithe a sholáthar.

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.

Admissions Criteria

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what criteria will be used by secondary schools to determine admission in a fair and equitable manner for all children. (AQW 642/09)

The Minister of Education: De réir na moltaí a chuir mé faoi bhráid an Fheidhmeannais ar 15 Bealtaine 2008, seo mar a leanas na critéir iontrála nach critéir acadúla iad a mbainfidh scoileanna úsáid astu:

In accordance with the proposals which I brought before the Executive on 15 May 2008 the non-academic admissions criteria for use by schools will be the following:

- Geography
 - Parish
 - Catchment Area
 - Nearest Suitable School
- Family criteria:
 - Currently attending sibling only
 - Eldest/first child
- Community:
 - Feeder primary school
- Socially disadvantaged criteria
 - looked after children
 - children entitled to Free School Meals
- Tie-breakers eg.
 - Random Selection

Nearly all of these criteria are similar to those operated by many schools already. In addition to these, I have stated that we will bring forward measures to ensure that rural and outlying applicants are not disadvantaged in transfer.

Teachers Suspended

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many teachers (i) were suspended (a) with pay; and (b) without pay, in the 2007-08 academic year; and (ii) are currently suspended. (AQW 691/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuireadh 17 múinteoir ar fionraí le pá agus níor chuireadh múinteoir ar bith ar fionraí gan phá i scoileanna rialaithe agus faoi chothabháil sa bhliain acadúil 2007/08. Tá seisear astu siúd atá ar fionraí le pá fós ar fionraí. Níl aon eolas ar fáil faoi láthair maidir le scoileanna deonacha gramadaí.

In the 2007/08 academic year 17 teachers were suspended with pay and none without pay in controlled and maintained schools. Of those suspended with pay 6 remain on suspension. Information is not currently available for voluntary grammar schools.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how the management of voluntary grammar schools will change under the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 759/09)

The Minister of Education: Beidh freagracht ar an Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna as gobharnóirí pobail a cheapadh chuig na suíocháin sin ar Bhoird Ghobharnóirí scoileanna gramadaí deonacha atá anois ag gobharnóirí a cheap an Roinn agus na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

The Education and Skills Authority will have responsibility for appointing community governors to the seats on voluntary grammar school Boards of Governors that are currently occupied by governors appointed by the Department and the education and library boards. The Boards of Governors of voluntary grammar schools will continue to have the right to be consulted about these appointments.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education to provide details of the neighbourhood renewal posts and services that her Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 887/09)

The Minister of Education: Chomhaontaigh mo Roinn aistriú teicniúil de £44k ó DSD sa bhliain airgeadais 2009/10 a chuirfidh le forbairt leanúnach pobail oiliúnaigh taobh istigh de Ballysally Primary School.

My Department has agreed to a technical transfer of £44k from DSD in the 2009/10 financial year which will provide for the continued development of a nurturing community within Ballysally Primary School.

I do fully support the objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and, through my focus on raising standards in education and, particularly, on tackling educational underachievement I am confident that education can and will make a real contribution to the success of that strategy. I am also encouraged that most of the Neighbourhood Partnerships have identified education as a key issue for their areas and I can assure them that Education and Library Boards and other education bodies will work closely with them, including through programmes such as Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry, to deliver improvements. The interest and involvement of local communities in education is a key factor in supporting the work of principals and teachers and in encouraging our young people to succeed and do well at school. I have seen at first hand through programmes such as Extended Schools and the Full Service School programme at the Belfast Boys and Girls Model schools examples of how schools are developing working relationships with parents, the wider community, health and social services and childcare agencies.

Education and Library Board Headquarters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education the number of vacancies in the headquarters of each of the 5 Education and Library Boards. (AQW 936/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne an t-eolas seo a leanas

maidir le líon na mball foirne atá fostaithe ag oifigí ceanncheathrún:

The education and library boards have provided the following information on headquarters staff employed:

NUMBER OF PEOPLE EMPLOYED AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS (AT 1 JANUARY IN EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS)

Board	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T
Belfast	178	26	174	26	159	23	162	28	155	37
Western	133	31	140	19	137	27	126	43	126	43
North Eastern	272	51	274	44	247	65	239	75	174	80
South Eastern	193	12	200	5	176	69	159	99	110	123
Southern	212	24	212	24	221	17	216	23	209	29

‘P’ indicates the number of people employed in a permanent capacity

‘T’ indicates the number of people employed in a temporary or agency capacity

These figures include services that are operated within a Board on behalf of all 5 Boards (e.g. SEELB’s Joint Legal Service). They exclude staff whose base is at headquarters buildings but who work in frontline services (e.g. the Education Welfare Service, the Curriculum Advisory Support Service and the Transport and Catering Services).

Data on the number of vacancies is not available from the five Boards on a comprehensive and consistent basis. To minimise the potential for future compulsory redundancies when the new Education and Skills Authority is established, vacancies are being covered largely by acting-up arrangements, or through the use of temporary/agency staff as indicated in the table.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have attended Irish medium (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools, in each of the last 10 years, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 938/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

PRIMARY1 AND POST PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS ENROLLED IN IRISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS AND UNITS2 BY CONSTITUENCY – 1998/99 – 2007/08

Constituency Name	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
Primary					
Belfast East	0	0	0	0	0

Constituency Name	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
Primary					
Belfast North	82	101	111	124	164
Belfast South	0	0	0	63	77
Belfast West	704	743	776	823	873
East Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
East Derry	0	0	0	0	14
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0
Foyle	218	211	208	202	253
Lagan Valley	0	0	0	0	0
Mid Ulster	0	0	0	73	157
Newry And Armagh	60	60	64	71	179
North Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
North Down	0	0	0	0	0
South Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
South Down	0	0	0	0	40
Strangford	0	0	0	0	0
Upper Bann	0	0	0	0	61
West Tyrone	0	0	0	65	107
Total	1,064	1,115	1,159	1,421	1,925
Post Primary					
Belfast West	268	308	332	342	364
Foyle	0	0	0	0	51

Constituency Name	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
Primary					
Newry And Armagh	0	0	0	0	10
Total	268	308	332	342	425

Constituency Name	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Primary					
Belfast East	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast North	162	175	192	199	190
Belfast South	79	86	82	89	103
Belfast West	901	934	951	963	951
East Antrim	0	0	0	0	0
East Derry	24	31	37	56	51
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	0	12	18	22	27
Foyle	279	296	289	279	294
Lagan Valley	0	0	0	0	0
Mid Ulster	173	182	186	212	236
Newry And Armagh	196	214	224	249	290
North Antrim	35	43	61	71	75
North Down	0	0	0	0	0
South Antrim	0	0	0	0	31
South Down	87	108	120	123	123
Strangford	0	0	0	0	0

Constituency Name	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Upper Bann	85	107	121	142	159
West Tyrone	143	166	179	193	216
Total	2,164	2,354	2,460	2,598	2,746
Post Primary					
Belfast West	406	442	470	489	506
Foyle	48	42	36	34	27
Newry And Armagh	26	37	64	88	99
Total	480	521	570	611	632

Source: Annual school census

Note:

1. Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
2. Pupils in Irish medium units were not recorded prior to the 2002/03 year
3. Enrolments in Irish Medium schools and units are based on the constituency of the school, which may differ from the constituency in which the pupil resides.

Education and Library Board Headquarters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many people have been employed at the headquarters of each Education and Library Board, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 939/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne an t-eolas seo a leanas maidir le líon na mball foirne atá fostaithe ag oifigí ceanncheathrún:

The education and library boards have provided the following information on headquarters staff employed:

NUMBER OF PEOPLE EMPLOYED AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS (AT 1 JANUARY IN EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS)

Board	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T
Belfast	178	26	174	26	159	23	162	28	155	37
Western	133	31	140	19	137	27	126	43	126	43
North Eastern	272	51	274	44	247	65	239	75	174	80
South Eastern	193	12	200	5	176	69	159	99	110	123
Southern	212	24	212	24	221	17	216	23	209	29

‘P’ indicates the number of people employed in a permanent capacity

‘T’ indicates the number of people employed in a temporary or agency capacity

These figures include services that are operated within a Board on behalf of all 5 Boards (e.g. SEELB’s Joint Legal Service). They exclude staff whose base is at headquarters buildings but who work in frontline services

(e.g. the Education Welfare Service, the Curriculum Advisory Support Service and the Transport and Catering Services).

Data on the number of vacancies is not available from the five Boards on a comprehensive and consistent basis. To minimise the potential for future compulsory redundancies when the new Education and Skills Authority is established, vacancies are being covered largely by acting-up arrangements, or through the use of temporary/agency staff as indicated in the table.

After School Sports Activities

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what grants are available from her Department to assist with transport costs for after school sports activities. (AQW 941/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní fios dom aon deontais a bheith ar fáil ó mo Roinn faoi láthair le cúnamh a thabhairt do chostais taistil do ghníomhaíochtaí spóirt iarscoile. Bíonn freagracht ar Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne as seirbhísí taistil baile go scoil a sholáthar ag gnáthamanna tosaigh agus críochnaithe na scoileanna.

I am not aware of any grants that are currently available from my Department to assist with transport costs for after school sports activities. The Education and Library Boards have a responsibility to provide home to school transport services to coincide with schools' normal opening and closing times. The Boards are not required to make additional arrangements to facilitate pupils' attendance at after school activities. However, as a concession, Translink permits pupils who are in receipt of a sessional ticket to travel on later services, where they are available.

Asbestos in Schools

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to name all schools in the North Down area that need work to replace asbestos structures. (AQW 1003/09)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has responsibility for the maintenance of controlled and maintained schools in the North Down constituency area. The Board has advised that it does not currently have plans for removal of asbestos structures in North Down schools.

The two voluntary grammar schools in North Down, Bangor Grammar School and Sullivan Upper Grammar School, have informed my Department that they do not currently have plans for removal of asbestos structures.

Nuair nach síltear é bheith riachtanach an aispeist a bhaint, bíonn na Boird agus na húdaráis eile scoile freagrach as bainistiú na haispeiste ar bhealach sábháilte.

Where it is not considered necessary to remove the asbestos, Boards and other school authorities are responsible for managing the asbestos safely.

Slemish College

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on providing a sports hall at Slemish College, Ballymena. (AQW 1005/09)

The Minister of Education: Aitnhníonn an Roinn an gá le halla spóirt bheith ann agus tá bainisteoir tionscadail á cheapadh le staidéar feidearthachta a thabhairt chun tosaigh in éineacht leis an scoil.

The Department recognises the need for a sports hall and is in the process of appointing a project manager to take forward a feasibility study with the school.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what processes are in place to decide which functions currently undertaken in (i) Rathgael House; and (ii) Waterside House; will be transferred to the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 1015/09)

The Minister of Education: Rinne an Roinn Oideachais athbhreithniú ar na feidhmeanna i dTeach Ráth Giall agus i dTeach Thaobh an Uisce a bhaineann go hiomlán nó go formhór le seachadadh oibriúcháin agus go ndéanfar iad a aistriú chuig an tÚdarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna (ESA) mar gheall air.

The Department of Education has reviewed the functions in both Rathgael House and Waterside House which relate wholly or mainly to operational delivery and would therefore transfer to the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The results of the review, which detailed by division, branch and function, the functions which will remain in the DE, those which will transfer to the ESA and those which will be shared, were issued to all staff on 27 February 2008.

Where it was not clear from the review that a function should transfer to ESA, a more detailed functional analysis is needed. This work is underway and staff in the affected branches and trade unions are being fully consulted. The outcome of this analysis should be completed by the end of the year.

Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Education why a teacher who has been vetted under the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order 2003 and has worked for an Education and Library Board, is required to pass through a similar check when moving to teach in another board area. (AQW 1018/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon cheanglas ann go ndéantar athsheiceáil ar bhaill foirne múinteoireachta agus neamh-mhúinteoireachta, a ndearnadh seiceáil réamhfhostaíochta orthu i limistéar Boird amháin agus nach raibh briseadh seirbhíse acu, má aistríonn siad go limistéar Boird eile.

There is no requirement for teaching and non teaching staff who have had a pre employment check in one Board area and who have not had a break in service, to be rechecked when moving to another Board area. The Department reiterated that this was unnecessary in the advice issued on 8 August 2008 to education authorities.

Schools' Admissions Criteria

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that children from rural areas are not disadvantaged by schools' admissions criteria. (AQW 1068/09)

The Minister of Education: Sna tograí a chuir mé faoi bhráid an Fheidhmeannais ar 15 Bealtaine 2008 thug mé gealltanas nach mbeadh páistí ó cheantair tuaithe faoi aon mhíbhuntáiste mar gheall ar na socruithe nua.

In my proposals that I put to the Executive on 15 May 2008 I made a commitment that children from rural areas would not be disadvantaged under the new arrangements. Work has taken place over the summer period to develop ways of meeting this commitment. The results of that work will be shared with colleagues in the Executive and Education Committee prior to being published.

Administrative Costs

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the additional administrative costs incurred by operating a wide range of school types. (AQW 1069/09)

The Minister of Education: Léiríonn éagsúlacht an chórais oideachais traidisiúin sheanbhunaithe agus prionsabal rogha na dtuismitheoirí agus bíonn na costais riaracháin a thabhaítear mar thacaíocht leis seo.

The diversity of the education system reflects long established traditions and the principle of parental choice and the administrative costs incurred are in support of this. The Review of Public Administration in education will introduce a common administrative structure for all schools here but it will not introduce a single education system. Government will continue to support a diverse range of schools giving parents and young people a real choice in the type of education available to best meet their needs.

Education Issues in Upper Bann

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) educationalists; (ii) interest groups and individuals; and (iii) political parties, with whom she has consulted on education issues in the Upper Bann constituency, since taking up office. (AQW 1070/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa tábla atá faoi iamh, liostaítear (i) oideachasóirí; (ii) grúpaí sainleasa agus daoine eile; agus (iii) páirtithe polaitíochta, a ndeachaigh mé i gcomhairle leo maidir le saincheistanna oideachais i dtoghcheantar na Banna Uachtaraí, ó thosaigh mé sa phost.

The attached table lists the (i) educationalists; (ii) interest groups and individuals; and (iii) political parties, with whom I have consulted on education issues in the Upper Bann constituency, since taking up office.

Date of contact	Name	Event/Meeting
Educationalists		
13/06/07	Principal & Staff of St Paul's JHS, Lurgan	Prizegiving
20/06/07	Principal & Staff of Lismore HS, Craigavon	To meet and talk to staff
20/06/07	Principal & Staff of Ceara Special School, Lurgan	School visit
27/06/07	Principal & Staff of St Mary's PS, Banbridge	School visit/to talk about newbuild
27/06/07	Principal & Staff of St Patrick's HS, Banbridge	School visit/to talk about newbuild
18/09/07	Lismore HS, Craigavon	Prizegiving
14/11/07	Principals of Special Schools in SELB area	Meeting
30/09/08	Principals of St Patrick's HS, Banbridge HS and New-Bridge Integrated College, Banbridge	Dinner with school principals to discuss transfer proposals
Interest Groups & Individuals		
14/05/07	Meeting with all ELB Chief Executives	Meeting re transfer proposals

Date of contact	Name	Event/Meeting
31/05/07	All members of SELB	Lunch meeting
14/08/07	'Creative I', Banbridge	Launch of project
08/10/07	Students from Upper Bann Institute	Discussion about underage drinking
10/10/07; 16/01/08; 09/04/08; 26/06/08; 17/09/08	Chairs of Education Organisations (including Marie Donnell, SELB Chair)	To discuss RPA in education
09/04/08	Travellers Support Project, Lismore, Craigavon	Visit/Meeting
Political Parties		
10/05/07	Dolores Kelly MLA - SDLP	Launch of Youth Project
23/01/08	George Savage MLA - UUP	Meeting re Buddy Bear Trust
12/05/08; 19/05/08; 02/06/08; 09/06/08; 23/06/08; 30/06/08; 08/09/08; 15/09/08; 22/09/08; 29/09/08	John O'Dowd MLA - SF	Meetings re Education Issues

Asbestos in Schools

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action her Department is taking to remove asbestos from schools. (AQW 1084/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá suirbhéanna agus measúnuithe riosca aispeiste déanta ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne in scoileanna. Tá na hoibreacha ardtosaíochta bainte aispeiste ar fad curtha i gcrích.

The Education and Library Boards have completed asbestos surveys and risk assessments in schools. All top priority asbestos removal works have been completed. Where it is not considered necessary to remove the asbestos immediately, the Boards and other school authorities are responsible for managing the asbestos safely.

As part of the September Monitoring Round a bid for £2,116k was made to assist the Education and Library Boards in carrying out their statutory obligation to manage asbestos.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many page views her Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1115/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa tábla seo a leanas, léirítear an méid uaireanta a breathnaíodh ar leathanaigh ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne Oideachais gach mí le dhá mhí dhéag anuas go dtí deireadh mhí Mheán Fómhair 2008.

The number of page views received by the Department of Education's website each month during the last twelve months up to the end of September 2008 is contained in the table below.

Year	Month	Page Views
2007	October	191,110
	November	144,407
	December	110,543
2008	January	172,648
	February	149,282
	March	132,162
	April	197,762
	May	187,124
	June	136,615
	July	102,759
	August	126,833
	September	163,535

St. Coleman's Primary School

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education (i) how many pupils have attended St. Coleman's primary school, Moira; and (ii) how many teaching and non-teaching staff the school employed, in each of the last 5 years, including the current academic year. (AQW 1128/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh: Níl an t-eolas don scoilbhliain 2008/09 ar fáil go fóill.

The information requested is as follows. Information for the 2008/09 school year is not yet available.

ENROLMENT FIGURES AT ST COLMAN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL 2003/04 – 2007/08

Year	Total enrolment
2003/04	32

Year	Total enrolment
2004/05	29
2005/06	31
2006/07	20
2007/08	18

Source: Annual school census

Note: Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT NUMBER OF TEACHERS AT ST COLMAN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL 2003/04 – 2007/08

Year	FTE Teachers
2003/04	1.0
2004/05	1.0
2005/06	2.0
2006/07	2.2
2007/08	2.0

Source: Teachers' Payroll and Pensions Administration System

NON-TEACHING STAFF AT ST COLMAN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL 2003/04 – 2007/08

Year	Non-teaching staff
2003/04	10
2004/05	8
2005/06	12
2006/07	10
2007/08	6

Source: South Eastern Education and Library Board

School Name	Breakdown by % of 11 plus grades accepted by all post-primary schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2007/08 school year						
	A %	B1 %	B2 %	C1 %	C2 %	D %	Others %
Ballycastle HS	2	0	5	2	5	17	69
Ballymoney HS	1	1	3	7	6	27	55
Cullybackey HS	1	0	0	2	5	49	43
Dunclug College	0	0	0	1	9	46	44
Dunluce School	0	0	0	2	4	47	47
Ballee Community HS	0	0	0	0	5	55	40
St Aloysius HS	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
Our Lady of Lourdes HS	0	3	3	3	7	26	58
St Patrick's College	0	0	3	3	3	36	55
Cross & Passion College	5	1	4	3	1	23	63
Slemish College	12	10	11	4	8	34	21
Cambridge House GS	18	10	15	23	19	13	2
St Louis GS	55	14	10	11	7	3	0
Ballymena Academy	78	10	11	1	0	0	0
Dalriada School	82	15	1	0	0	0	2

North Antrim Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown by percentage, of pupils' 11+ grades accepted by all secondary and grammar schools in North Antrim, in the last 3 complete academic years.
(AQW 1155/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil sna tablaí seo a leanas:

The information requested is provided in the following tables:

School Name	Breakdown by % of 11 plus grades accepted by all post-primary schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2006/07 school year						
	A %	B1 %	B2 %	C1 %	C2 %	D %	Others %
Ballycastle HS	2	2	0	2	0	17	77
Ballymoney HS	0	2	1	6	9	24	58
Cullybackey HS	2	1	0	2	5	42	48
Dunclug College	1	0	0	1	5	45	48

School Name	Breakdown by % of 11 plus grades accepted by all post-primary schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2006/07 school year						
	A %	B1 %	B2 %	C1 %	C2 %	D %	Others %
Dunluce School	0	1	1	0	9	34	55
Ballee Community HS	0	0	0	2	4	42	52
St Aloysius HS	7	0	0	0	0	36	57
Our Lady of Lourdes HS	3	3	0	6	5	22	61
St Patrick's College	0	0	3	1	11	50	35
Cross & Passion College	4	2	2	5	3	13	71
Slemish College	25	7	8	7	8	27	18
Cambridge House GS	14	8	25	18	22	12	1
St Louis GS	63	14	18	2	0	2	1
Ballymena Academy	78	17	3	0	0	0	2
Dalriada School	67	13	6	9	2	0	3

School Name	Breakdown by % of 11 plus grades accepted by all post-primary schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2005/06 school year						
	A %	B1 %	B2 %	C1 %	C2 %	D %	Others %
Ballycastle HS	2	2	0	9	5	16	65
Ballymoney HS	2	1	3	4	5	18	67
Cullybackey HS	1	2	1	0	10	43	43
Dunclug College	0	1	2	0	9	49	39
Dunluce School	1	0	4	2	6	40	47
Ballee Community HS	2	0	0	2	5	40	51
St Aloysius HS	0	0	0	0	0	47	53
Our Lady of Lourdes HS	2	0	2	0	2	26	68

School Name	Breakdown by % of 11 plus grades accepted by all post-primary schools in the North Antrim Constituency, in the 2005/06 school year						
	A %	B1 %	B2 %	C1 %	C2 %	D %	Others %
St Patrick's College	0	0	4	2	4	42	48
Cross & Passion College	5	1	0	3	4	11	76
Slemish College	13	8	4	9	10	40	16
Cambridge House GS	19	21	22	24	7	5	2
St Louis GS	56	12	16	11	2	2	1
Ballymena Academy	88	10	1	0	0	0	1
Dalriada School	73	22	2	0	0	0	3

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.

Donaghadee High School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many pupils at Donaghadee High School are placed in the special needs unit. (AQW 1162/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí 78 dalta in aonad na riachtanas speisialta ag Donaghadee High School le linn na bliana acadúla 2007/08. Níl eolas don scoilbhliain 2008/09 ar fáil go fóill.

There were 78 pupils placed in the special needs unit at Donaghadee High School during the 2007/08 academic year. Information for the 2008/09 school year is not yet available.

Donaghadee High School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education, in the next academic year, what schools in the North Down area will be able to take the children with special needs currently attending Donaghadee High School. (AQW 1163/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt (SEELB) dom go ndéanfar athbhreithniú bliantúil ar ráitis, i gcás gach páiste atá ag freastal ar Donaghadee High School a

bhfuil ráiteas ar riachtanais oideachais speisialta (SEN) ag an SEELB fúthu, de réir na gceanglas reachtúil.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South – Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) that each child currently attending Donaghadee High School for whom the SEELB holds a statement of special educational needs (SEN) will, in line with statutory requirements, undergo an annual review of their statements. On completion of this process, which will take account of all factors relating to the child's SEN in the form of professional advice, parental and school input, a conclusion will be reached on the appropriate educational placement. The SEELB will facilitate this process and will approach all relevant schools in North Down area as well as schools in the wider geographical area, once it has been ascertained how many parents wish their children to go to a particular school.

Bangor Academy

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education why her Department is unable to approve two additional places in Bangor Academy to admit two Year 8 pupils from Bangor who are still unplaced, when the school has spare capacity in other year groups. (AQW 1169/09)

The Minister of Education: 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 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 South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that one of the two young people you refer to has now taken up

a place at another school and there are places available at alternative schools for the other pupil.

Bionn an Roinn toilteanach i gcónaí breithniú a dhéanamh ar iarrtais ó scoileanna maidir lena líon iontrálacha agus lena líon rollaithe.

The Department is always willing to consider request 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.

Children with Special Needs

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost, in each of the last five years, of (i) buses; and (ii) taxis, used to transport children with special needs, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1179/09)

The Minister of Education: Is féidir liom a dheimhniú gur tabhaíodh an caiteachas seo a leanas ar bhusanna (lena n-áirítear feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus comhlachtaí príobháideacha) agus ar thacsaithe ó sholáthar iompair bhaile go scoile do dhaltai a bhfuil Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais acu, i ngach bliain le cúig bhliain anuas:

I can confirm that the provision of home to school transport for pupils with Special Educational Needs incurred the following expenditure on buses (which includes Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators) and taxis, in each of the last five years:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
School Buses	2003/04	£2,169k	£1,391k	£1,417k	£240k	£252k	£5,526k
	2004/05	£2,302k	£1,492k	£2,415k	£235k	£339k	£6,783k
	2005/06	£2,625k	£1,409k	£2,316k	£180k	£347k	£6,877k
	2006/07	£2,726k	£1,295k	£4,189k	£210k	£397k	£6,883k
	2007/08	£2,687k	£1,319k	£3,125k	£297k	£412k	£7,840k

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Taxis	2003/04	£659k	£1,055k	£2,285k	£1,010k	£152k	£5,161k
	2004/05	£434k	£1,230k	£1,907k	£1,057k	£181k	£4,809k
	2005/06	£425k	£1,295k	£1,795k	£1,616k	£212k	£5,343k
	2006/07	£447k	£1,129k	£1,546k	£1,511k	£121k	£4,754k
	2007/08	£531k	£978k	£1,648k	£1,440k	£110k	£4,707k

Maintained Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) former; and (ii) current, maintained primary schools that have applied to be granted integrated status in each of the last 10 years.
(AQW 1180/09)

The Minister of Education: Níor chuir aon scoileanna faoi chothabháil iarratas isteach ar stádas imeasctha le 10 mbliana anuas.

No maintained schools applied for integrated status in the last 10 years.

Irish Medium Post-Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost, in each of the last five years, of

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
2004/05	-	-	£4k	-	£9k	£13k
2005/06	-	-	£4k	-	£4k	£8k
2006/07	£6k	-	£3k	-	£4k	£13k
2007/08	£6k	-	-	-	£2k	£8k

Controlled Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of taxis in each of the last 5 years, for pupils attending controlled primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 1182/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained

taxis for pupils attending Irish medium post-primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board.
(AQW 1181/09)

The Minister of Education: Detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Is féidir liom a dheimhniú gur tabhaíodh an caiteachas ar sholáthar tacsaithe mar mhódh iompair idir an baile agus an scoil do pháisti a d'fhreastail ar Iarbhunscoileanna Ghaeilge ón scoilbhliain 2004/2005.

I can confirm that the provision of home to school transport for pupils attending Irish-Medium post-primary schools incurred the following expenditure on taxis, since 2004/2005.

Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos an caiteachas a thabhaítear ar sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£78k	£517k	£169k	£508k	£344k	£1,616k
	2004/05	£38k	£481k	£141k	£522k	£410k	£1,592k
	2005/06	£29k	£373k	£133k	£299k	£385k	£1,219k
	2006/07	£83k	£337k	£115k	£219k	£501k	£1,255k
	2007/08	£92k	£242k	£81k	£189k	£267k	£871k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£32k	£18k	£5k	£24k	£80k
	2005/06	£5k	£32k	£17k	-	£26k	£80k
	2006/07	£9k	£48k	£15k	£5k	£24k	£101k
	2007/08	£10k	£44k	£8k	£11k	£21k	£94k

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£46k	-	-	£84k	£131k
	2005/06	-	£28k	-	-	£41k	£69k
	2006/07	-	£12k	-	-	£24k	£36k
	2007/08	-	£22k	£8k	£2k	£23k	£55k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Maintained Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of taxis in each of the last 5 years, for pupils attending maintained primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board.
(AQW 1183/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools

– not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos an caiteachas a thabhaítear ar sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£78k	£517k	£169k	£508k	£344k	£1,616k
	2004/05	£38k	£481k	£141k	£522k	£410k	£1,592k
	2005/06	£29k	£373k	£133k	£299k	£385k	£1,219k
	2006/07	£83k	£337k	£115k	£219k	£501k	£1,255k
	2007/08	£92k	£242k	£81k	£189k	£267k	£871k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£32k	£18k	£5k	£24k	£80k
	2005/06	£5k	£32k	£17k	-	£26k	£80k
	2006/07	£9k	£48k	£15k	£5k	£24k	£101k
	2007/08	£10k	£44k	£8k	£11k	£21k	£94k
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£46k	-	-	£84k	£131k
	2005/06	-	£28k	-	-	£41k	£69k
	2006/07	-	£12k	-	-	£24k	£36k
	2007/08	-	£22k	£8k	£2k	£23k	£55k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Free Transport

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education has she any plans to examine the criteria for free transport to and from school.
(AQW 1190/09)

The Minister of Education: Is dócháil go mbeidh impleachtaí móra ar sholáthar chúnaimh iompair baile

go scoil mar gheall ar na tograí le haghaidh athraithe ar na socruithe um aistriú iarbhunscoile.

The proposals for changes to the post-primary transfer arrangements are likely to have major implications for the provision of home to school transport assistance. Therefore, the Department has decided to postpone

work on a review until the way forward in relation to the transfer arrangements has been finalised.

Primary and Post-Primary Schools Funding

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans to address the funding differential between primary and post-primary schools.

(AQW 1202/09)

The Minister of Education: As outlined in my announcement of 12 February 2008 on Education funding, provision has been made to increase the proportion of funding made available to primary schools under the delegated Local Management of Schools funding formula, alongside additional funding outside of the formula in support of primary schools.

Under the delegated funding formula, I have increased the primary Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) which is the main funding factor in the formula. This means that, on average, additional primary per pupil increases in 2008/09 are higher than those for post primary schools. I have also signalled my intentions to increase further the primary AWPU weighting over the next two years of this budget period.

Over the next three years, I have been able to secure additional funding of almost £12 million to help primary school teaching principals and a further £32 million to support primary schools with the delivery of the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum. Additional provision is also planned, over the next three years, for Literacy and Numeracy measures, implementation of the Special Education Needs and Inclusion Review, an Emotional Health and Wellbeing programme in primary and special education, and additional Early Years provision, etc.

Tá mé tiomanta dona chinntiú go mbeidh an deis ag ár leanaí agus ár ndaoine óga go léir an acmhainn atá iontu a bhaint amach trí sheirbhísí oideachais den scoth bheith ar fáil, agus thug mé le fios go bhfuil sé ar intinn agam go mbeidh cothromaíocht níos fearr ann maidir leis an maoiniú a chuirtear ar fáil do scoileanna bunoidreachais agus iarbhunoidreachais, agus é sin a dhéanamh laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil.

I am committed to ensuring that all our children and young people have the opportunity to fulfil their potential through quality education services, and have signalled my intention, within available resources, to improving the balance of funding between primary and post-primary schools.

Schools are to be consulted over the autumn on proposals for changes to the current Common Funding Formula including changes, which if approved, would

see increases in the levels of delegated funding provided to primary schools.

Primary Schools Projects

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education why money allocated for primary school activities/teaching is ring fenced; and if under spent why it cannot be used for other approved primary schools projects.

(AQW 1204/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní srianta é maoiniú atá dáilte chuig scoileanna faoi na socrúithe Comh-mhaoiniú do bhainisteoireacht áitiúil na scoileanna – tá údarás iomlán ag scoileanna le caiteachas a shocrú bunaithe ar a gcuid riachtanas agus a gcuid tosaíochtaí.

Funding distributed to schools under the Common Funding arrangements for the Local Management of Schools is not ring fenced – schools have full delegated authority to determine spending based on their needs and priorities.

Maintained Post-Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) former; and (ii) current, maintained post-primary schools that have applied for integrated status in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 1211/09)

The Minister of Education: Níor chuir aon scoileanna faoi chothabháil iarratas isteach ar stádas imeasctha le 10 mbliana anuas.

No maintained schools applied for integrated status in the last 10 years.

Integrated Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of taxis in each of the last 5 years, for pupils attending integrated primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board.

(AQW 1212/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos an caiteachas a thabhaítear ar sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£78k	£517k	£169k	£508k	£344k	£1,616k
	2004/05	£38k	£481k	£141k	£522k	£410k	£1,592k
	2005/06	£29k	£373k	£133k	£299k	£385k	£1,219k
	2006/07	£83k	£337k	£115k	£219k	£501k	£1,255k
	2007/08	£92k	£242k	£81k	£189k	£267k	£871k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£32k	£18k	£5k	£24k	£80k
	2005/06	£5k	£32k	£17k	-	£26k	£80k
	2006/07	£9k	£48k	£15k	£5k	£24k	£101k
	2007/08	£10k	£44k	£8k	£11k	£21k	£94k
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£46k	-	-	£84k	£131k
	2005/06	-	£28k	-	-	£41k	£69k
	2006/07	-	£12k	-	-	£24k	£36k
	2007/08	-	£22k	£8k	£2k	£23k	£55k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Irish-Medium Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of taxis in each of the last 5 years, for pupils attending Irish medium primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board.

(AQW 1213/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained

Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos an caiteachas a thabhaítear ar sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£78k	£517k	£169k	£508k	£344k	£1,616k
	2004/05	£38k	£481k	£141k	£522k	£410k	£1,592k
	2005/06	£29k	£373k	£133k	£299k	£385k	£1,219k
	2006/07	£83k	£337k	£115k	£219k	£501k	£1,255k
	2007/08	£92k	£242k	£81k	£189k	£267k	£871k

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£32k	£18k	£5k	£24k	£80k
	2005/06	£5k	£32k	£17k	-	£26k	£80k
	2006/07	£9k	£48k	£15k	£5k	£24k	£101k
	2007/08	£10k	£44k	£8k	£11k	£21k	£94k
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£1k	£46k	-	-	£84k	£131k
	2005/06	-	£28k	-	-	£41k	£69k
	2006/07	-	£12k	-	-	£24k	£36k
	2007/08	-	£22k	£8k	£2k	£23k	£55k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Controlled Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of school transport by bus in each of the last 5 years, for pupils attending controlled primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 1214/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics

are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£313k	£3,158k	£1,987k	£3,063k	£2,827k	£11,348k
	2004/05	£327k	£3,656k	£1,480k	£3,282k	£3,127k	£11,872k
	2005/06	£360k	£3,295k	£1,443k	£2,981k	£3,171k	£11,250k
	2006/07	£394k	£3,089k	£1,423k	£2,756k	£3,517k	£11,179k
	2007/08	£256k	£3,097k	£704k	£2,783k	£3,124k	£9,964k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£99k	£397k	£31k	£171k	£150k	£848k
	2005/06	£95k	£353k	£36k	£75k	£186k	£745k
	2006/07	£85k	£322k	£43k	£116k	£140k	£706k
	2007/08	£75k	£308k	£109k	£108k	£133k	£733k
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£10k	£105k	£1k	-	£43k	£159k
	2005/06	£4k	£73k	£0.5k	-	£61k	£138.5k
	2006/07	£2k	£48k	£1k	£16k	£38k	£105k
	2007/08	£2k	£75k	£2k	£28k	£49k	£156k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Maintained Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of school transport by bus in each of the last 5 years, for pupils attending maintained primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 1215/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics

are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£313k	£3,158k	£1,987k	£3,063k	£2,827k	£11,348k
	2004/05	£327k	£3,656k	£1,480k	£3,282k	£3,127k	£11,872k
	2005/06	£360k	£3,295k	£1,443k	£2,981k	£3,171k	£11,250k
	2006/07	£394k	£3,089k	£1,423k	£2,756k	£3,517k	£11,179k
	2007/08	£256k	£3,097k	£704k	£2,783k	£3,124k	£9,964k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£99k	£397k	£31k	£171k	£150k	£848k
	2005/06	£95k	£353k	£36k	£75k	£186k	£745k
	2006/07	£85k	£322k	£43k	£116k	£140k	£706k
	2007/08	£75k	£308k	£109k	£108k	£133k	£733k
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£10k	£105k	£1k	-	£43k	£159k
	2005/06	£4k	£73k	£0.5k	-	£61k	£138.5k
	2006/07	£2k	£48k	£1k	£16k	£38k	£105k
	2007/08	£2k	£75k	£2k	£28k	£49k	£156k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Special Needs Assessment

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many children are currently awaiting special needs assessment in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1224/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne gur mar seo a leanas líonta na bpáistí atá ag fanacht ar mheasúnú riachtanas speisialta.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the following numbers of children are currently awaiting special needs assessment.

BELB	267
NEELB	593
SEELB	421
SELB	516
WELB	242

These figures are in regard to children with a variety of need, including Stage 3 (non-statutory assessments) and Stage 4 (statutory assessments) of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, reviews at Stage 3 and Stage 5 of the Code of Practice, special testing at transfer stage between primary and post-primary, preschool and examination arrangements.

Electricity, Gas and Oil Price Increases

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to assist (i) Education and Library Boards; and (ii) schools, in relation to electricity, gas and oil price increases. (AQW 1244/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn gach eagraíocht freagrach as brúnna airgeadais a bhainistiú i gcoinne tosaíochtaí iomaíocha laistigh de na hacmhainní a leithdháileadh orthu.

It is the responsibility of all organisations to manage financial pressures against competing priorities within the resources allocated to them.

In recognition of the additional in year pressure on both Education & Library Board's and schools, caused by the increase in the cost of electricity, gas and oil, a significant bid for additional resources to meet these pressures was submitted in the course of the formal June monitoring round and again in September when the former was not successful. We are currently awaiting the outcome of the September monitoring round.

Special Needs Assessment

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many children had a special needs assessment in (i) 2006/07; (ii) 2007/08; and (iii) 2008/09, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1253/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios dom ag príomhfheidhmeannaí na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne go ndearnadh measúnú riachtanais speisialta ar na líonta páistí seo a leanas sna blianta 2006/07, 2007/08 agus 2008/09

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the following numbers of children had a special needs assessment in 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09.

ALL PUPILS ON THE SEN REGISTER (STAGES 1 – 5 OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE) BY SCHOOL SECTOR AND ELB – 2007/08

School sector	ELB					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Vol. & Private Preschools	39	97	127	131	110	504
Nursery	255	174	238	251	82	1,000
Primary	6,088	6,307	6,089	6,506	6,677	31,667
Post primary	5,721	4,354	3,365	3,595	4,021	21,056
Special	1,275	740	1,012	1,166	418	4,611
Total	13,378	11,672	10,831	11,649	11,308	58,838

Source: Annual school census 2007/08

Note: Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

1. 2006/07

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
2,405	1,648	4,139	2,277	2,885

2. 2007/08

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
2,850	1,833	5,122	2,182	3,028

3. 2008/09 (TO END OF SEPTEMBER 2008)

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
183	89	498	163	726

All of the above figures are in respect of academic years with the exception of WELB which has been provided in financial years.

These figures are in regard to children with a variety of need, including Stage 3 (non-statutory assessments) and Stage 4 (statutory assessments) of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, reviews at Stage 3 and Stage 5 of the Code of Practice, special testing at transfer stage between primary and post-primary, preschool and examination arrangements.

Special Needs Assistance

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many children currently receive special needs assistance in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1254/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo mar a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh.

The information requested is as follows.

Assistance for Dyslexia

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many children received assistance for dyslexia in (i) 2006-07; (ii) 2007-08; and (iii) 2008-09, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1255/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh liostaithe sa tábla thíos. Níl sonraí ar fáil go fóill don scoilbhliain 2008/09.

The information requested is listed in the table below. Data for the 2008/09 school year are not yet available.

All pupils with dyslexia by school sector and ELB – 2006/07 and 2007/08

Year	ELB					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
2006/07	834	1,987	501	1,318	905	5,545
2007/08	895	2,008	519	1,308	949	5,679

Source: Annual school census

Note:

1. Totals include preschool centres, nursery schools, children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes in primary schools, post primary and special schools.
2. Figures relate to pupils at Stages 1 – 5 of the Special Educational Needs Code of practice.

Specialised Reading Centres

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education what criteria are applied when allocating places at specialised reading centres in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1256/09)

The Minister of Education:

Tugadh le fios dom ag príomhfheidhmeannaigh Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste agus an Oirdheiscirt go gcuirtear na critéir atá léirithe thíos i bhfeidhm nuair a chionnroinntear áiteanna ar ionaid léitheoireachta speisialta. Níl aon ionad speisialta léitheoireachta ag Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt, an Dheiscirt ná an Iarthair.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards that the criteria outlined below are applied when allocating places at specialised reading centres. The North Eastern, Southern and Western Education and Library Boards do not have specialised reading centres.

Belfast Education and Library Board

Priority is given to:-

- Children of average cognitive ability (IQ 90 or more) who have below average reading ability (standardised test scores of less than 85 and reading ages of less than 9 years) and who exhibit a large discrepancy between cognitive test scores and reading test scores (fewer than 2% of children would exhibit such discrepancies).
- Children who have not responded well to support already provided in their own mainstream school including support for one or two years from the peripatetic support service.
- Children who are approaching transfer age before embarking on post primary education.

Consideration is also given to whether the child has additional difficulties such as social, emotional, behavioural or organisational difficulties which are related to their specific learning difficulties and also to the likely impact on the child's general emotional wellbeing of being placed in a specialist setting. The views of the parents and the child are given central importance in the decision making process.

South- Eastern Education and Library Board

Priority is given to:-

- Children whose standardised test results indicate that cognitive functioning lies at or above the 25th centile i.e. an IQ of 90 or above
- Children who demonstrate a discrepancy between expected and actual attainments in standardised tests.
- Children whose test scores for word reading, reading comprehension or spelling are less than 85
- Children whose standardised test scores indicate that word reading age or reading comprehension age or spelling age is below 9 years.

The major qualifying criteria for direct teaching support are word reading and reading comprehension. In circumstances where spelling attainment is the only qualifying criterion advisory support will be offered to the school in order to help staff to formulate an appropriate spelling programme.

School Children Statemented

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education (i) what percentage of school children were statemented in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) how this compares with the other four Education and Library Board areas. (AQW 1259/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an freagra cuimsithe sa tábla thíos.

The answer is contained in the table below.

**PERCENTAGE OF ALL PUPILS STATEMENTED BY
EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD - 2003/04 – 2007/08**

Year	ELB					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
2003/04	2.7	2.8	2.8	4.5	3.1	3.2
2004/05	2.7	3.1	3.0	4.8	3.3	3.4
2005/06	2.7	3.3	3.1	4.9	3.6	3.5
2006/07	3.0	3.4	3.3	5.1	3.8	3.7
2007/08	3.3	3.6	3.4	5.1	4.1	3.9

Source: Annual school census

Note:

- Figures are based on the location of the school and include preschool centres, nursery schools, nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes in primary schools, post primary and special schools.
- A pupil is classed as being statemented when they reach Stage 5 of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

Statutory Assessment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many requests for statutory assessment were made in each primary school in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last 5 years; and to detail this figure as a percentage of the primary school population. (AQW 1260/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios dom ag príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt nach gcoinnítear an t-eolas san fhormaid a iarradh agus go mbeadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a chur i láthair.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South – Eastern Education and Library Board that this information is not held in the format requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Integrated Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school bus transportation for pupils attending integrated primary schools broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1273/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na geineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach cearn de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£313k	£3,158k	£1,987k	£3,063k	£2,827k	£11,348k
	2004/05	£327k	£3,656k	£1,480k	£3,282k	£3,127k	£11,872k
	2005/06	£360k	£3,295k	£1,443k	£2,981k	£3,171k	£11,250k
	2006/07	£394k	£3,089k	£1,423k	£2,756k	£3,517k	£11,179k
	2007/08	£256k	£3,097k	£704k	£2,783k	£3,124k	£9,964k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£99k	£397k	£31k	£171k	£150k	£848k
	2005/06	£95k	£353k	£36k	£75k	£186k	£745k
	2006/07	£85k	£322k	£43k	£116k	£140k	£706k
	2007/08	£75k	£308k	£109k	£108k	£133k	£733k

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£10k	£105k	£1k	-	£43k	£159k
	2005/06	£4k	£73k	£0.5k	-	£61k	£138.5k
	2006/07	£2k	£48k	£1k	£16k	£38k	£105k
	2007/08	£2k	£75k	£2k	£28k	£49k	£156k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Irish-Medium Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school bus transportation for pupils attending Irish-medium primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Boards, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1274/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics

are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Primary Schools	2003/04	£313k	£3,158k	£1,987k	£3,063k	£2,827k	£11,348k
	2004/05	£327k	£3,656k	£1,480k	£3,282k	£3,127k	£11,872k
	2005/06	£360k	£3,295k	£1,443k	£2,981k	£3,171k	£11,250k
	2006/07	£394k	£3,089k	£1,423k	£2,756k	£3,517k	£11,179k
	2007/08	£256k	£3,097k	£704k	£2,783k	£3,124k	£9,964k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£99k	£397k	£31k	£171k	£150k	£848k
	2005/06	£95k	£353k	£36k	£75k	£186k	£745k
	2006/07	£85k	£322k	£43k	£116k	£140k	£706k
	2007/08	£75k	£308k	£109k	£108k	£133k	£733k
Irish-Medium Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£10k	£105k	£1k	-	£43k	£159k
	2005/06	£4k	£73k	£0.5k	-	£61k	£138.5k
	2006/07	£2k	£48k	£1k	£16k	£38k	£105k
	2007/08	£2k	£75k	£2k	£28k	£49k	£156k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Controlled Post-Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school bus transportation for pupils attending controlled secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1275/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics

are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	£138k	£3,795k	£2,024k	£5,887k	£3,903k	£15,747k
	2004/05	£96k	£4,264k	£2,516k	£6,195k	£4,407k	£17,478k
	2005/06	£57k	£4,375k	£2,591k	£6,596k	£5,383k	£19,002k
	2006/07	£54k	£4,540k	£2,756k	£5,369k	£4,309k	£17,028k
	2007/08	£57k	£4,677k	£2,037k	£5,614k	£3,842k	£16,227k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£453k	£476k	£859k	£639k	£630k	£3,057k
	2005/06	£507k	£503k	£873k	£503k	£614k	£3,000k
	2006/07	£532k	£549k	£915k	£595k	£558k	£3,149k
	2007/08	£636k	£622k	£927k	£646k	£687k	£3,518k
Irish-Medium Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£26k	£3k	£56k	-	£3k	£88k
	2005/06	£35k	£4k	£59k	-	£2k	£100k
	2006/07	£38k	£5k	£64k	£10k	£7k	£124k
	2007/08	£33k	£7k	£29k	£73k	£6k	£148k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Maintained Post-Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school bus transportation for pupils attending maintained secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1276/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information

pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	£138k	£3,795k	£2,024k	£5,887k	£3,903k	£15,747k
	2004/05	£96k	£4,264k	£2,516k	£6,195k	£4,407k	£17,478k
	2005/06	£57k	£4,375k	£2,591k	£6,596k	£5,383k	£19,002k
	2006/07	£54k	£4,540k	£2,756k	£5,369k	£4,309k	£17,028k
	2007/08	£57k	£4,677k	£2,037k	£5,614k	£3,842k	£16,227k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£453k	£476k	£859k	£639k	£630k	£3,057k
	2005/06	£507k	£503k	£873k	£503k	£614k	£3,000k
	2006/07	£532k	£549k	£915k	£595k	£558k	£3,149k
	2007/08	£636k	£622k	£927k	£646k	£687k	£3,518k
Irish-Medium Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£26k	£3k	£56k	-	£3k	£88k
	2005/06	£35k	£4k	£59k	-	£2k	£100k
	2006/07	£38k	£5k	£64k	£10k	£7k	£124k
	2007/08	£33k	£7k	£29k	£73k	£6k	£148k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Integrated Post-Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school bus transportation for pupils attending integrated secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1277/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics

are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	£138k	£3,795k	£2,024k	£5,887k	£3,903k	£15,747k
	2004/05	£96k	£4,264k	£2,516k	£6,195k	£4,407k	£17,478k
	2005/06	£57k	£4,375k	£2,591k	£6,596k	£5,383k	£19,002k
	2006/07	£54k	£4,540k	£2,756k	£5,369k	£4,309k	£17,028k
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		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Irish-Medium Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	#
	2004/05	£26k	£3k	£56k	-	£3k	£88k
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	2006/07	£38k	£5k	£64k	£10k	£7k	£124k
	2007/08	£33k	£7k	£29k	£73k	£6k	£148k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education how many staff are employed in her Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff.
(AQW 1290/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá na sonraí a iarradh mar a leanas

The details requested are as follows:

Number of staff employed in DE Private Office	Cost: 2007/08	Cost: 2008/09 (1 April to 30 September 2008)
8	£154,491	£85,580

Children with Dyslexia

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many mainstream schools in the Fermanagh/ South Tyrone area have a dedicated teacher for children with dyslexia.
(AQW 1295/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí Bhord Oideachais agus Leabhairlainne an Deiscirt agus an Iarthair go mbíonn séirbhísí ionad bhunaithe ag na Boird a thugann tacaíocht do pháistí a fhreastlaíonn ar ghnáthscoileanna a bhfuil deachrachtaí litearthachta ar leith acu.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Southern and Western Education and Library Boards that the Boards have centre-based services that support children with specific literacy difficulties who are in a mainstream school. In addition selected schools have obtained dyslexia friendly status to support a whole school approach to meeting the needs of the child. Some mainstream schools may appoint a dedicated teacher for children with dyslexia, although this is at the discretion of the school.

Papers and Policy Documents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education if references to Northern Ireland are changed to North

of Ireland in relation to papers and policy documents from the departmental unit responsible for children and young people who do not use English as a first language.
(AQW 1310/09)

The Minister of Education: Is fearr liom tuaisceart na hÉireann a úsáid agus léirítear é seo i ngach cumarsáid ó mo Roinn.

It is my personal preference to use north of Ireland and reflect this in all my Departmental communications.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the annual cost to maintain her Departmental website.
(AQW 1330/09)

The Minister of Education: It is not possible to provide a figure on the annual cost of maintaining my Department's website, as it is hosted on a server with other government websites within the Civil Service and a disaggregated figure for site maintenance is not held.

Tá roinnt ball foirne ón Roinn Oideachais a mbíonn sé de dhualgais orthu an t-eolas atá ar an láithreán gréasáin a nuashonrú.

A number of Department of Education staff contribute to updating the information held on the site as part of their duties.

Irish-Medium Post-Primary Schools

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school bus transportation for pupils attending Irish medium secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 1398/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the

Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated and Irish-Medium sectors cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas a tabhaíodh trí sholáthar na gcineálacha áirithe bhusanna scoile (feithiclí de chuid na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, iompar poiblí agus tiománaithe

príobháideacha), le cúig bhliain anuas i ngach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of the various types of school buses (Education and Library Board vehicles, public transport and private operators), over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

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	2007/08	£33k	£7k	£29k	£73k	£6k	£148k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Computer Training Officers

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 6891/08, if he will (i) give an update on the review by the University of Ulster on the number of computer training officers; (ii) indicate whether redundancies of computer training officers are being considered at any location. (AQW 1013/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The University advises that its Faculty of Computing and Engineering is carrying out a review of its staffing requirements on each of the three campuses on which it currently operates. This includes academic, technical, and academic-related staff including Computer Training Officers.

It is the University's protocol that, once the review is complete, discussions are held with the respective Trade Unions in the first instance, followed directly by staffing groups.

The University is scheduled to meet with the recognised Trade Unions next week and, following those discussions, it will then engage with staff directly. In order to ensure that due process is followed, the University feels that it would be unfair to make any comment in relation to any particular staff grouping at this point.

Removal of the Externality Rule

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his Department's assessment (i) of the possible replication of qualifications that might occur following the removal of the externality rule; and (ii) of the recognition of organisations offering training as proposed in the Department for Employment and Learning consultation on vocational qualifications; and how his Department would avoid the replication of qualifications following the removal of the externality rule. (AQW 1026/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As you state, your questions relate to issues on which my Department is currently consulting, namely the reform

to the regulatory system for vocational qualifications. I am proposing that the externality rule, which currently restricts organisations from both providing education and training and awarding a qualification following assessment, should be removed. This will allow, for example, employers and other training providers, such as Further Education colleges, to award accredited qualifications for the training they provide, and will remove an aspect of the current system which is seen as being unnecessarily bureaucratic. Such awarding organisation status would be subject to the qualifications regulators being satisfied that the organisation has the capacity to act in this way, and that it meets stringent standards of quality and propriety.

As part of the qualifications accreditation process, it is intended that the regulators will ensure that qualifications submitted for accreditation enjoy the support of the relevant Sector Skills Council and do not duplicate qualifications already accredited to the framework. In this way, the system will ensure that all accredited qualifications are appropriate and worthwhile, and that the framework is populated by an appropriate range of useful qualifications.

It is my assessment that this proposed system will ensure that the vocational education and training delivered in Northern Ireland is well-targeted, is clearly understandable to learners, training providers and employers, and will meet the skills needs of the economy as a whole.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQO 150/09, to detail the downturn in performance by the Belfast Metropolitan College in 2007-08; and the reasons for this. (AQW 1058/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The 2007-08 audited accounts for Belfast Metropolitan College will not be available until November 2008 and so it is not possible to provide precise details of the college's financial performance until then. As I noted in response to the previous question, my Department, in co-operation with the Belfast Metropolitan College Governing Body, is commissioning an independent review of the college operation, including its financial management. Until this review is further advanced, the Department is unable to comment on the possible reasons for the college's downturn in financial performance.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the centres at which the Belfast

Metropolitan College provides full-time courses in the (i) West Belfast constituency area; and (ii) North Belfast constituency area. (AQW 1091/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Belfast Metropolitan College provides full-time courses in the West Belfast constituency area at its Whiterock Building. The college does not provide any full time courses in the North Belfast constituency area.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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.

(AQW 1105/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning does not keep records of carbon usage and has no plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken.

The Department is however fully committed to reducing environmental damage and monitors the travel undertaken by staff. Emphasis is placed on promoting alternative methods of conducting business, including the use of video/telephone conferencing.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many page views his Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1114/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of page views for the Department for Employment and Learning's website from 1 October 2007 to 30 September 2008 is shown in the table below

Month	Page Views
October 2007	196,684
November 2007	166,817
December 2007	117,530
January 2008	274,069
February 2008	202,906
March 2008	179,366
April 2008	193,993
May 2008	181,642
June 2008	213,747

Month	Page Views
July 2008	204,143
August 2008	280,938
September 2008	310,755
Totals	2,522,590

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning 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 1136/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I did not meet directly with Professor Bain to discuss the independent review of policy on location of public-sector jobs.

However Dr Aileen McGinley, the Department's Permanent Secretary, did meet with Professor Bain regarding the review, but did not make any specific recommendations regarding relocation of Departmental jobs.

Kilcooley Women's Education Group

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) if his department funds the Kilcooley Women's Education Group; and (ii) if not, to give the reasons.

(AQW 1164/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not fund the Kilcooley Women's Education Group. The Department does not core fund non-statutory organisations to deliver education provision.

I also understand the Group did not make an application under the first Call of the Northern Ireland ESF Programme 2007-13.

Executive Meetings

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what areas of his Department's business are being held up by the Executive's failure to meet.

(AQW 1198/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In July 2008, papers on the Regulatory Reform for Qualifications, the Fixed Term Employee (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) Regulations and Maternity and Paternal Leave/Paternity and Adoption

Leave (Amendment) Regulations were progressed through Urgent Procedure as a consequence of Executive meetings not taking place. Further items such as the new Careers Strategy will require Executive approval before launch.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of students that have enrolled for courses in Belfast Metropolitan College in 2008/9; (ii) how this figure compares with 2007/8; and (iii) the total number of courses/modules that have been withdrawn due to lack of enrolment.

(AQW 1343/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Enrolment for courses at Belfast Metropolitan College for this new academic year is still in process. Therefore, it is not yet possible (i) to provide an assessment of the number of students enrolled in 2008/09; (ii) or, therefore, to provide a comparison with 2007/08 figures; (iii) or to detail the total number of courses/modules that have been withdrawn due to lack of enrolment.

Interim college enrolment statistics for 2008/09 will be available in December 2008, with validated full-year statistics for that year available in December 2009.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Regional Tourism Partnerships

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has reduced funding to the regional tourism partnerships.

(AQW 747/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Tourism Ireland is the international marketing body responsible for marketing Northern Ireland in Great Britain and overseas. NITB no longer has a direct role in marketing Northern Ireland as a standalone destination in these markets and therefore does not provide funding for Regional Tourism Partnership (RTP) activity in international marketing.

NITB has the marketing remit for Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland so it is important to minimise duplication of effort. The role of the RTPs should therefore complement that of NITB and as such, RTP funding allocation is aligned to NITB's corporate objectives.

The RTP role will be to develop and implement innovative ideas which complement the signature projects and the product portfolios in NITB's Draft Corporate Plan for 2008-2011. This will be delivered via Service Level Agreements (SLA) with clear aims, objectives, targets and demonstrable outputs. NITB has discussed core SLAs with the RTPs. These cover services required by NITB in support of key priorities and objectives and funding for 2008 to 2009. Arrangements for subsequent years will be the subject of further discussion.

Financial support has been offered to RTPs through SLA's for 2008/09, worth £70,000 each for delivery of these services. NITB also intends to launch a new programme – the Tourism Innovation Fund for revenue projects, approx £2m per annum over PfG which will be funded through the EU. This scheme is currently being developed with the Department and will focus on the delivery of innovative products or projects to extend visitor spend and stay in line with the PfG targets. RTPs are eligible to apply for these funds via a competitive process.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that the reduction of funding from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to regional tourism partnerships will have on the targets set out in the Programme for Government, which is to increase the number of visitors to Northern Ireland by 25% and increase visitor spend by 40% by 2011. (AQW 748/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The reduction of funding to the Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs) should not have a major impact on the targets set out in the programme for Government.

The Programme for Government (PfG) has established challenging targets. With them come additional resources directed against identified priorities that will have the greatest impact in achieving targets.

NITB is focusing its resources on key priorities that will deliver against the national objectives and PfG targets.

Sub-regional activities have been identified which could be carried out by regional organisations such as RTPs or other local agents. These activities include increasing the breadth and depth of visitor content on the discovernorthernireland.com consumer website, clustering the industry and supplying industry packages and product offers to support NITB campaigns in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and delivering familiarisation trips for both media and travel trade. Financial support has been offered to RTPs through Service Level Agreements in 2008-09 for delivery of these services.

The reduction in funding to RTPs relates primarily to international marketing – this is not within the remit of NITB. Tourism Ireland will continue to promote within Great Britain and overseas to deliver the PfG targets, while NITB will focus on driving development of the product in partnership with key agencies, with resources allocated accordingly.

NITB also intends to launch a new programme – the Tourism Innovation Fund for revenue projects (approx £2m per annum over PfG) which will be funded through the EU. This scheme is currently being developed with the Department and will focus on the delivery of innovative products or projects to extend visitor spend and stay in line with the PfG targets. RTPs will be eligible to apply for these funds via a competitive process.

Development of a Lough Neagh Authority

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the tourist potential that the development of a Lough Neagh Authority might have for the region around the Lough. (AQW 894/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Lough Neagh region, defined as Antrim, Magherafelt, Craigavon, Lisburn and Dungannon & South Tyrone Council areas has benefited from funding provided by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) through the Regional Tourism Partnerships.

Lough Neagh's main tourism strength lies in the range of water-based sports and activities that it has to offer. NITB is working to develop the Lough as a key element of its Sports Activities and Waterways product.

Lough Neagh features in marketing activity undertaken by NITB and Tourism Ireland through websites, publications and targeted campaigns to promote tourism growth to Northern Ireland.

Partnership is the way forward for successful tourism development and delivery, and within this context the Lough Neagh Partnership has played a leading role in the Lough's development. NITB also engages with the Lough Neagh Partnership to develop the tourist and leisure potential of the Lough.

My department and its agencies will continue to work with relevant partners to ensure continued progress in the development of Lough Neagh as a tourist destination.

Construction Industry

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the number of individuals employed in all aspects of the construction

industry who have registered as unemployed since 1 July 2007. (AQW 917/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to provide an exact measure of the number of people employed in all aspects of the Construction Industry who have registered as unemployed since 1 July 2007.

However, between the 12th July 2007 and 14th August 2008, there was a net increase of 2,245 persons registered for unemployment benefits who were previously employed in construction related occupations.¹

The information is not available from 1st July 2007 because the count date for the July 2007 claimant count data was 12th July. Similarly the count date for the August 2008 data was 14th August.

- 1 This includes the following Standard Occupational Classification 2000 codes: 1122 (Managers in construction), 2121 (Civil engineers), 3114 (Building and civil engineering technicians), 5216 (Pipe fitters), 5241 (Electricians, electrical fitters), 53 (Skilled construction and building trades), 8141 (Scaffolders, staggers, riggers), 8142 (Road construction operatives), 8149 (Construction operatives n.e.c.), 8221 (Crane drivers), 8229 (Mobile machine drivers and operatives n.e.c.) and 912 (Elementary construction trades).

Hotels in North Antrim

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list all grants paid to hotels in North Antrim. (AQW 1006/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI performance information is captured on the basis of the amount of assistance offered and not on assistance that is paid. The table below details the assistance offered by Invest NI to hotels in North Antrim for the period from 1 April 2006 to 6 October 2008.

Financial Year Ending	Hotel	Invest NI Assistance Offered
31 March 2007	Adair Arms	£6,618
	Galgorm Manor	£1,676,767
	Tullymore House Ltd (Ten Square & Galgorm)	£34,166
31 March 2008	Nil	
Current Financial Year to Date	Bushmills Inn	£488,283

Hotel Development

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the volume of tourists that visit North Antrim, what assessment she has made of the need for further overnight accommodation and hotel development in the Ballymoney area. (AQW 1007/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I fully recognise the growing number of tourists staying overnight in the North Antrim area. Further growth is anticipated once the Giant's Causeway and Antrim and Causeway Coast Signature Project is complete.

My Department has commenced a strategic review of the wider accommodation needs across the whole of Northern Ireland. I am confident that this review, which will be based on recent trends, future growth assessments and potential accommodation developments currently in the planning cycle, will allow us to make an informed regional assessment of likely future needs.

Financial Assistance for Hotels

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what financial assistance Invest NI has paid to hotels; (ii) to list each hotel that has received financial assistance; and (iii) the amount of money offered to each hotel. (AQW 1008/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The financial assistance offered by Invest NI for the development of hotel projects in the period from 1 April 2002 to 6 October 2008 is detailed below:

Hotel	Invest NI Assistance Offered
Adair Arms	£6,618
Beech Hill Country House Hotel	£21,665
Beechlawn House Hotel	£43,983
Burrendale Hotel	£5,005
Bushmills Inn	£494,350
Carrybridge Hotel	£200,000
Clandeboy Lodge Hotel	£38,642
Corrs Corner	£3,762
Crawfordsburn Inn	£45,578
Culzean Estates Limited	£4,924
Customs House	£8,000
Days Hotel	£119,635
Donard Hotel	£8,985
Drummond Hotel	£105,850

Hotel	Invest NI Assistance Offered
Dunadry Development Company	£52,411
Dunsilly Arms Hotel (Comfort)	£516,678
Express by Holiday Inn Antrim	£28,364
Fir Trees Hotel	£231,647
Galgorm Hotel	£1,676,767
Hastings Hotel Group	£356,164
Hilton Hotel Belfast	£202,198
Hilton Hotel Templepatrick	£168,324
Holiday Inn Belfast	£46,437
Holiday Inn Express - Craigavon	£475,000
Hotel Carlton	£167,811
Jury's Hotel	£47,329
Killyhevlin Hotel	£835,400
Kilmorey Arms Hotel	£200,000
La Mon House Hotel	£82,784
Londonderry Arms Hotel	£4,538
Lough Erne Golf Resort	£3,500,000
Magherabuoy House Hotel	£453,177
Mahons Hotel	£176,600
Malmaison Belfast	£96,480
Malone Lodge Hotel & Apartments	£55,217
Manor House Country Hotel	£220,162
Park Avenue Hotel	£110,595
Radisson Roe Park Hotel	£22,989
Radisson SAS Belfast	£235,819
Ramada Da Vinci's Hotel	£51,734

Hotel	Invest NI Assistance Offered
Silverbirch Hotel	£14,800
Slieve Donard Hotel	£2,540,000
Strangford Arms Hotel	£22,000
The Merchant Hotel	£141,536
Tower Hotel	£12,780
Tullymore House Ltd (Ten Square & Galgorm)	£34,166
Valley Hotel	£5,710
Westville Hotel	£19,472
White Horse Hotel	£55,318

Invest NI does not currently have a centralised database of grant payments for tourism projects.

It has consistently answered queries on assistance to tourism accommodation in terms of *offers of* assistance. This also provides a more accurate reflection of total investment as Invest NI holds back retention of grant payments until after project completion.

Assistance Offered by Invest NI

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (i) list how much money Invest NI gave to businesses each year from 2004-2008; and (ii) give a breakdown of those figures by category or type of business. (AQW 1054/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Tables 1 and 2 present the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI in each of the financial years between 2004/05 and 2007/08 broken down by ownership status and sector. The total planned investment, which represents the total costs of supported projects, is also included.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI ASSISTANCE BY OWNERSHIP STATUS (2004/05 - 2007/08)

YEAR	External		Local		Total	
	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m
2004/05	63.8	268.1	69.9	228.9	133.7	497.0
2005/06	84.8	432.5	48.9	183.9	133.7	616.4
2006/07	48.7	233.6	48.2	220.3	96.9	453.9
2007/08	54.6	320.3	60.6	369.1	115.2	689.4
Total	251.9	1,254.5	227.7	1,002.1	479.6	2,256.7

Note: Table totals may not add due to rounding.

TABLE 2: INVEST NI ASSISTANCE BY SECTOR (2004/05 - 2007/08)

Sector	2004/05		2005/06		2006/07		2007/08		TOTAL	
	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m
Manufacturing										
Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals	5.3	50.3	4.3	16.3	0.8	2.6	7.2	109.5	17.6	178.8
Clothing & Textiles	3.2	10.8	0.9	3.9	2.0	11.3	1.1	5.3	7.2	31.3
Electrical, Electronic & Optical Equipment	4.2	15.6	39.1	153.2	2.1	7.0	3.9	14.7	49.3	190.5
Fabricated Metal Products & Metal Finishing	6.7	26.0	3.9	21.5	2.0	7.6	2.8	12.8	15.3	67.9
Food, Drink & Tobacco	12.5	70.6	10.3	94.2	5.7	52.4	6.2	41.7	34.7	258.9
Glass, Ceramic & Concrete Products	2.0	10.5	0.3	1.3	1.4	7.4	2.3	49.0	6.1	68.1
Non-Electrical Machinery	11.1	46.7	6.8	42.0	2.1	9.1	5.9	47.4	26.0	145.1
Other Manufacturing	2.1	9.8	5.1	20.8	1.4	10.4	1.4	6.9	10.0	47.9
Paper Products, Printing & Publishing	1.5	4.6	4.4	31.9	0.8	3.6	3.5	37.2	10.1	77.2
Rubber & Plastic products	3.7	14.7	8.3	34.8	1.5	6.6	4.2	21.3	17.8	77.4
Transport Equipment	5.7	21.4	1.0	3.8	4.6	26.0	13.2	90.8	24.4	142.0
Wood Products	2.2	15.4	0.3	0.9	0.4	3.7	1.4	7.7	4.4	27.8
Total Manufacturing	60.2	296.4	84.8	424.5	24.7	147.7	53.2	444.4	222.9	1,313.0
Services										
Business & Financial Services	32.9	111.7	18.6	93.5	32.7	135.8	18.3	76.2	102.6	417.2
Construction Services	1.4	6.5	1.0	4.7	1.2	7.8	2.1	12.2	5.7	31.1
Software & Computer Services	14.3	34.9	9.4	51.5	10.9	74.9	16.5	81.5	51.0	242.8
Other Services	9.3	26.8	3.5	19.3	16.5	74.6	10.0	47.4	39.4	168.1
Total Services	57.8	179.9	32.5	169.0	61.4	293.0	46.9	217.3	198.6	859.2
Total Sector Based	118.0	476.3	117.2	593.5	86.1	440.7	100.1	661.7	421.5	2,172.2
Non-Sector Specific	15.7	20.7	16.5	22.9	10.9	13.2	15.1	27.7	58.2	84.5
Grand Total	133.7	497.0	133.7	616.4	96.9	453.9	115.2	689.4	479.6	2,256.7

Notes: 1. Table totals may not add due to rounding.

2. 'Non-Sector Specific' includes TSO's, Universities and Trade Assistance.

Financial Assistance for Hotels

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many grants or offers of financial assistance were given by Invest NI to hotels with (i) 0-20 bedrooms; (ii) 20-30 bedrooms; (iii) 30-40 bedrooms; (iv) 40-50 bedrooms; (v) 50-60 bedrooms; and (vi) 60 plus bedrooms, in the last financial year.

(AQW 1055/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the financial year ended 31 March

2008 Invest Northern Ireland made 7 offers of assistance for the development of hotels.

- (i) One offer to a hotel with 0-20 rooms;
- (ii) One offer to a hotel with 20-30 rooms;
- (iii) No offers to hotels with 30-40 rooms;
- (iv) No offers to hotels with 40-50 rooms;
- (v) One offer to a hotel with 50-60 rooms;
- (vi) Four offers to hotels with 60+ rooms.

Investment from the United States of America

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps she is taking to promote investment from the United States of America. (AQO 640/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has a network of offices located in North America, in New York, Boston and San Jose. These offices focus on promoting all areas of Northern Ireland as locations capable of providing solutions to the business needs of new investors wishing to establish here. Sectorally, efforts are concentrated on the innovation-based sectors of international traded services, particularly, software, business services, financial services and ICT.

The US is the largest market and as you will be aware, the USNI conference took place over 7-9th May 2008. Over 150 influential business leaders and potential investors had an opportunity to see at first hand what we have to offer.

Invest Northern Ireland has followed up with all 150 business delegates at the USNI conference. Leslie Morrison, Chief Executive of Invest Northern Ireland has already completed a conference follow up visit to the US and met with Senior Executives in New York. Meetings have also taken place in London and Dublin. To date 40 expressions of interest have been received.

In addition, Invest Northern Ireland is hosting a series of follow up "salon events" with existing investor CEOs, attendees at the conference, advocates of Northern Ireland, and targeted decision makers in prospect companies. I will be travelling to the West Coast in October 2008 and hosting a Salon in Silicon Valley.

The growing uncertainty and the economic downturn, means US companies are tightening their belts and are increasingly focusing on cost containment, and they are deferring investment decisions. As a result the pipeline of new FDI prospects is not as strong as this period last year.

The project sales cycle for inward investment can take 18-24 months to complete. Invest Northern Ireland will continue to maintain a strong sales presence in the USA and we expect that the results, in terms of investment, especially those flowing from the Conference, may take some time to come to fruition.

Start a Business Programme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how many businesses have been created in the Ards Borough Council area via the 'Start a Business' programme since the programme's inception; and (ii) the number of these businesses that are still in existence. (AQW 1137/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: From inception in September 2001, the Start A Business Programme has supported 818 new business starts within the Ards Borough Council area.

An independent evaluation of the Start a Business Programme, carried out in 2006 showed that 78% of businesses surveyed were still trading 3 years after receiving the initial support.

While comprehensive data on the current status of the 818 Ards start-ups is not available, client monitoring indicates that their overall survival rates are on a par with the NI average.

Exploris Aquarium

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the (i) nature; (ii) purpose; and (iii) value, of any financial assistance the Department has given to the Exploris Aquarium and its predecessor the Northern Ireland Aquarium. (AQW 1140/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below gives details of the nature, purpose and value of financial assistance awarded by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to Exploris and the Northern Ireland Aquarium:

Project:	Description	Scheme	Offer	Date
Exploris Seal Sanctuary	Development of a seal sanctuary at Exploris.	ERDF Tourism Programme 1994-99	£416,813	09/03/2001
Exploris: Improved Interpretation & Access	Provision of a modified audio visual presentation and improvement of wheelchair access.	NITB's Tourism Development Scheme	£14,885	24/02/1999

Project:	Description	Scheme	Offer	Date
Exploris	Survey of NI attractions summer 1997 to improve management information and marketing/visitor service.	Marketing Support Scheme (ERDF)	£779	11/03/1998
Exploris	Tourism Development International will survey key attractions in N. Ireland and the Republic on visitor service, pricing, demography.	Marketing Support Scheme (ERDF)	£800	12/03/1996
		Total:	£433,277	

NITB has not received any applications from Exploris since its last successful application under the European Regional Development Fund Tourism Programme 1994-99.

Invest NI

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any arrangements made by Invest NI to secure equity in a client company in return for financial assistance, in the last two years; and what measures are in place to protect public funds invested on this basis. (AQW 1141/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: From April 2006 to date, Invest NI has made 17 equity investments totaling £2,420,000. Of these investments, 9 were in the form of preference shares totaling £1,517,000, 6 by way of ordinary shares totaling £342,000, and 2 ordinary share exchanges totaling £561,000, the latter as a result of client companies being acquired by a third party. The details are as outlined in Appendix 01.

Application

Applications by existing or prospective clients for financial assistance are submitted to Invest NI Client Teams and must be supported by a comprehensive business plan.

Appraisal Process

The Corporate Finance Appraisal & Advisory Division (CFAAD) within Invest NI provides an independent commercial appraisal of the company's business/project plans, as presented to Invest NI.

CFAAD undertakes all appraisals where assistance proposed is greater than £250,000. This division can also be engaged where levels of assistance of less than £250,000 are being considered (e.g. a proposed equity participation).

The objectives of the appraisal are:

- (i) To assess the viability and economic efficiency of projects and companies submitting projects for support;
- (ii) to recommend conditions to be attached to any offer of assistance to strengthen the project and/or to protect Invest NI's position; and
- (iii) to advise the Client Executive, if requested, on the structure of the proposed package of financial assistance.

Casework Submission and Approval Process

Following the appraisal process, a Casework Submission is prepared in order to obtain the necessary approvals from the appropriate casework committees for the proposed package of assistance. Any conditions and/or monitoring arrangements recommended by the commercial appraiser in CFAAD are also included within the Casework Submission. Approvals are provided in accordance with Invest NI's internal delegations and the appropriate delegated limits as set down by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Specifically, for equity investments over a certain limit, Department of Finance & Personnel approval is required.

Conditions of Assistance and Monitoring Requirements

Once approval is granted, Invest NI prepares the appropriate Financial Assistance Agreement (FAA) for the type of support being offered. All conditions and monitoring requirements included within the casework are incorporated into this agreement. The FAA forms a legal agreement between the client and Invest NI. It must be signed and accepted by the client and any specific conditions must be satisfied before grant is issued or payment is made.

All investments made by Invest NI are subject to regular monitoring by the appropriate Client Managers and Client Executives in accordance with Invest NI's monitoring procedures.

AQW 1141/08 - APPENDIX 01

1	2006-07	Fighting Bull Technologies	Ordinary shares	50,000
2	2006-07	Irish Polymers	Preference shares	100,000
3	2006-07	Glenaden Shirts Limited	Preference shares	100,000
4	2006-07	Reflex Mouldings Ltd	Preference shares	200,000
5	2006-07	Iconi Software	Preference shares	31,500

6	2006-07	Conexant (Amphion Make Whole Agree)	Ordinary shares - exchange	76,516
7	2007-08	Quantum Hosiery (Previously Adria)	Preference shares	575,264
8	2007-08	AXIS Three Ltd (Lisburn)	Ordinary shares	50,000
9	2007-08	Dark Water Studios	Ordinary shares	100,000
10	2007-08	Fusion Antibodies	Ordinary shares	84,000
11	2007-08	BiancaMed	Preference shares	250,000
12	2007-08	Replify	Preference shares	100,000
13	2007-08	Sensor Technology & Devices Ltd	Preference shares	50,000
14	2007-08	Autonomy (bought over Meridio)	Ordinary shares - exchange	484,000
15	2008-09	Level Seven Creative Ltd	Preference shares	110,000
16	2008-09	AXIS Three Ltd	Ordinary shares	28,294
17	2008-09	SISAF	Ordinary shares	30,000
Total				2,419,574

Exchange ordinary	2	560,516
New pref	9	1,516,764
New ordinary	6	342,294
Total		2,419,574

Invest NI

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the success rate of any companies which have received assistance from Invest NI in return for an equity stake; and to outline what measures are in place to protect jobs within those companies. (AQW 1142/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's ability to take an equity stake in a company is only one of several types of financial intervention at the agency's disposal and is in line with its policy of seeking to reduce the reliance of companies on grant support. Equity investments are most commonly made in those companies which carry a higher risk profile than more established businesses.

Between 2002 and 2008, Invest NI has made equity investments in 77 companies totalling £27.3m. To date, of these investments, 14 have been repaid (£4.9m) and 10 (£2.8m) have failed. Of the remaining companies, 44 continue to trade at present. On this basis, the success rate is approximately 75%.

Invest NI adopts the same intervention principles and appraisal process for all projects whether equity or grant based. This involves an assessment of the economic benefits of the project, a key element of which is consideration of the project's ability to create and/or safeguard employment. At the post approval stage, Invest NI continues to monitor each project's progress against a range of predefined milestones, which may include employment levels. As part of this process, the agency can continue to provide its clients with access to a broad range of support to help them increase their productivity and become more internationally competitive.

Northern Ireland Business Tourism Expo

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update of the numbers of key buyers who attended the Northern Ireland Business Tourism Expo in Belfast on 2nd and 3rd October 2008, from (i) Great Britain; (ii) Republic of Ireland; (iii) United States of America; (iv) Canada; (v) France; and (vi) Germany. (AQW 1262/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Forty seven buyers from the above six markets attended the Northern Ireland Business Tourism Expo 2008. The attendance was as follows:

Market	Number of Buyers
Great Britain	21
Republic of Ireland	11
United States of America	4
Canada	3
France	4
Germany	4

NIE Farm Popular Tariff

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explain why the NIE Farm Popular Tariff has moved from the least expensive tariff in pence per kilowatt hour, to become the most expensive tariff, over the last 5 years. (AQW 1308/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NIE Energy has advised that in April

2003, using a common annual consumption of 22,000 units, the overall Farm Popular (FP) price per unit of 9.24p was just below the standard small business price (by 0.12p or 1.3%), and likewise below the standard domestic price (by 0.14p). Over the following 4 years to April 2007 the FP price remained between the domestic and small business prices.

Restructuring of the tariffs following the establishment of the Single Electricity Market (SEM) in November 2007 resulted in changes to the allocation of energy costs in the various tariff categories. In particular, the old "Bulk Supply Tariff" that previously split electricity prices into time-banded rates for days and weekends and took account of summer and winter usage, was changed. This impacted both positively and negatively on different categories of energy consumers, with customers who use energy overnight, such as businesses with 24 hour operations, and some farmers, having to pay more for their electricity.

As a result of the tariff increases in July and October 2008, the FP price rose to 17.7p, which is approximately 0.9p above both small business and standard domestic prices. This represents an increase of 48% since 2003. However all tariffs have seen an increase of over 40% since then, driven primarily by the increasing cost of global fossil fuels used for electricity generation.

I understand that NIE Energy is contacting individual customers on the FP tariff to see if an alternative tariff might offer them a more economical option.

NIE Farm Popular Tariff

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the NIE Farm Popular Tariff has almost doubled in the period from April 2003 to October 2008. (AQW 1309/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NIE Energy has advised that in April 2003, using a common annual consumption of 22,000 units, the overall Farm Popular (FP) price per unit of 9.24p was just below the standard small business price (by 0.12p or 1.3%), and likewise below the standard domestic price (by 0.14p). Over the following 4 years to April 2007 the FP price remained between the domestic and small business prices.

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with customers who use energy overnight, such as businesses with 24 hour operations, and some farmers, having to pay more for their electricity.

As a result of the tariff increases in July and October 2008, the FP price rose to 17.7p, which is approximately 0.9p above both small business and standard domestic prices. This represents an increase of 48% since 2003. However all tariffs have seen an increase of over 40% since then, driven primarily by the increasing cost of global fossil fuels used for electricity generation.

I understand that NIE Energy is contacting individual customers on the FP tariff to see if an alternative tariff might offer them a more economical option.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the annual cost to maintain her Departmental website. (AQW 1328/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The annual cost to maintain the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment website is £11,400.

Tourism-Related Projects

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many tourism-tourism-related projects applied for grant aid from (i) (a) Larne; (b) Carrickfergus; and (c) Newtownabbey Borough Councils; and (ii) the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1379/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Part (i) of this question can only be answered by the Borough Councils themselves.

The table below gives the total number of applications for financial assistance received by The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) from projects in the Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey Borough Council areas in each of the last 5 years:

Borough Council:	2003/04:	2004/05:	2005/06:	2006/07:	2007/08:	Total:
Larne	Nil	Nil	Nil	11	1	12
Carrickfergus	Nil	1	Nil	2	2	5
Newtownabbey	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	3	3
Total	Nil	1	Nil	13	6	20

In addition to the above an application was received from Causeway Coast & Glens Tourism Partnership

during 2003/04 under the Peace II programme in respect of a project covering 8 different Council areas including the 3 specified above.

An application was also received from the Causeway Coast and Glens Limited during 2005/06 in respect of the Causeway Coastal Route a project covering 10 different Council areas including the 3 specified above.

Tourism-Related Projects

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how much has been spent

Borough Council:	2003/04:	2004/05:	2005/06:	2006/07:	2007/08:	Total:
Larne	Nil	8,352.52	16,204.39	52,575.82	16,173.86	£93,306.59
Carrickfergus	600.00	8,352.52	16,204.39	46,333.38	29,361.45	£100,851.74
Newtownabbey	Nil	8,352.52	16,204.39	46,333.38	16,173.86	£87,064.15
Total	£600.00	£25,057.56	£48,613.17	£145,242.58	£61,709.17	£281,222.48

Included in these totals are payments to The Causeway Coast & Glens Tourism Partnership, a Regional Tourism Partnership covering 8 different Council areas including the 3 specified, and payments in respect of the Causeway Coastal Route, a project covering 10 different Council areas including the 3 specified. These payments have been weighted, 1/8th and 1/10th respectively, to reflect the benefits to each of the Council areas specified.

Part (ii) of this question can only be answered by the Borough Councils themselves.

by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in (a) Larne; (b) Carrickfergus; and (c) Newtownabbey Borough Councils, on tourism-related projects in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) how much has been spent by (a) Larne; (b) Carrickfergus; and (c) Newtownabbey Borough Councils, on tourism-related projects in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1380/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below details the total payments of financial assistance made to projects in the Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey Borough Council areas in each of the last 5 years by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board:

The Department published a paper in January 2007, addressing the latest uplift in the Regional Development Strategy Housing Growth Indicators that had produced a housing yield deficit in BMAP. This paper included information on windfall figures in order to inform the Public Inquiry process. These figures are not produced by the Department on a regular basis. However, the Department monitors housing development in urban areas, and this includes planning applications for unzoned land. These statistics are published in the Northern Ireland Housing Land Availability Summary Report which is available on the Planning Service website. The Department does not monitor rural windfall figures.

ENVIRONMENT

Belfast Metropolitan Area

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment for an update of the Belfast Metropolitan area urban and rural windfall figures, in relation to the statistics provided to the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan inquiry in January 2007, which only covered the period 1 April 2003 to 31 April 2006. (AQW 688/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Potential housing yield in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) includes an estimate of the number of houses that will be built on sites zoned for housing, and an allowance for windfall development. Windfall development consists of an allowance for new housing within the urban footprint, that cannot be precisely predicted locationally, and which is not therefore zoned, but which it is anticipated will take place.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment what Neighbourhood Renewal posts and services his Department will fund from March 2009. (AQW 711/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department will fund no Neighbourhood Renewal posts or services from March 2009.

Planning Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment why Planning Service does not routinely check buildings to ensure that the completed structure complies with all the conditions outlined in the planning approval. (AQW 789/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department does not routinely check all buildings to ensure that

the completed structure complies with the approved plans and all the conditions outlined in the planning approval as this is very resource intensive at a time when overall planning application numbers are high. In this respect there is clearly an onus on applicants to ensure that completed structures comply with all the conditions attached to the grant of planning permission.

However, following the grant of any planning permission, the case officers may identify a particular development which requires proactive monitoring by the enforcement team to ensure the development is carried out as approved and conditions complied with. In addition development control staff, when out on site in the course of their normal duties, may also identify breaches of planning control that require action.

My Department will investigate all alleged breaches of planning control brought to its attention through monitoring by enforcement staff where appropriate and those identified by other Planning Service staff, other Government Departments and public agencies, elected representatives and members of the public and take whatever action is considered necessary on a case by case basis.

Planning Enforcement Notices

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) how many planning enforcement notices have been served for the breach of planning regulations in the Carrickfergus area; and (ii) how many have been enforced, from January 2007 to August 2008. (AQW 872/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Four planning enforcement notices have been served in the Carrickfergus area since 1998.
- (ii) From January 2007 to August 2008 two Enforcement Notices have been taken to appeal. One was dismissed and the notice has been complied with, the other appeal is still to be heard.

Custodial Sentences

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to introduce custodial sentences as part of the review of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order of 1985. (AQW 922/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am determined that penalties for wildlife crime in Northern Ireland should offer an effective deterrent and the right level of punishment. I plan to bring forward proposals for custodial sentences as part of the review of the Wildlife Order and have already approached the Secretary of State on this issue. I want

to give the Courts discretion to deal properly with persistent and serious offenders.

Infestations

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) rat; (ii) mice; and (iii) insect infestations have affected businesses selling food to the public in each of the last 3 years, broken down by (a) council area; and (b) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 931/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has no policy responsibility or legislative role in relation to rat, mice or insect infestations and therefore my Department does not hold this data.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of the Environment if he will investigate the number of heavy goods vehicles registered in the Republic of Ireland and operating from Northern Ireland based companies. (AQW 944/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are 56 vehicles registered within the Republic of Ireland which are attached to Northern Irish licensed operators. There is no legal impediment to prevent these vehicles being used by an operator who holds an International Operators Licence, provided they are used solely for international journeys outside the UK and within the EU.

There are no records available on the number of Republic of Ireland registered vehicles operating for non-licensed goods vehicle operators.

Advisory Councils

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of his recent statements on the appointment of people residing in the Republic of Ireland to serve on advisory councils, what advice he sought from, and was given by, his Department prior to making such public statements. (AQW 981/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the context of the reconstitution of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and of the Historic Monuments Council, my officials informed me that there were Republic of Ireland representatives on the Councils, who were nominated by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and that this arrangement had been introduced by a direct rule Minister to facilitate cross-border communication.

They suggested that I might wish to consider whether this arrangement should continue.

Historic Church Buildings

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any funding available from his Department for the repair and restoration of historic church buildings. (AQW 996/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Listed buildings grant-aid, administered by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), is available for Grade A and B+ listed church buildings. The level of grant-aid for maintenance and repair is currently 35% of the eligible costs of such work. This reflects an increase of 12/3% over the old rate of 331/3%. Its introduction followed the issue of a new 'standardised' grant percentage for such work which was rolled out on 20 May this year. NIEA also offers grant-aid at 75% of reasonable professional fees.

Although Grade B1 and B2 listed churches are not eligible for such grant-aid, a review of grant-aid to all listed churches is currently underway. This review will involve an assessment of grant-aid provision by other statutory agencies in the UK and Ireland, plus a public consultation exercise. It will also include meetings with key church groups in Northern Ireland.

Glenfarm Holdings' Incinerator Plant

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to provide the number of complaints his Department has received about Glenfarm Holdings' incinerator plant at Glenavy in the last 6 months. (AQW 998/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is not aware of an incinerator plant at Glenavy operated by Glenfarm Holdings. This being the case no complaints have been received within the last six months.

However, Rose Energy are seeking permission to construct a biomass fuelled power plant at Glenavy which does involve incineration. To date there have been nearly 5000 letters of objection to the proposal since the planning application was received in June 2008.

Infestations

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he will take to deal with the infestation of rats at Woburn Bay, Millisle. (AQW 999/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I would refer the Member to my response to AQW 931/09. The Department of the Environment has no policy

responsibility or legislative role in relation to rat infestations and cannot advise on this matter.

Motorbikes and Quad Bikes

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what by-laws exist to stop motorbikes and quad bikes being used on public beaches. (AQW 1000/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is the confirming authority for bye-laws made by individual district councils for the seashore, but does not have any power to make bye-laws on its own behalf regarding vehicles on public beaches.

Ownership of bye-laws rests with the district councils that made them and bear responsibility for updating and enforcing them. My Department does not keep a register of the bye-laws currently in operation, and therefore does not have the information you have requested.

Bumble Bees

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what steps are being taken to address the decline in the number of bumble bees; and (ii) what assessment he has made of the impact of disease on the numbers of bumble bees. (AQW 1020/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is well aware of the current plight of the wild bumble bee populations around the UK and Ireland, that they have experienced significant declines and recognises their important function as pollinators of flowers and crops.

Two bumble bees, *Bombus (Psithyrus) rupestris* the cuckoo bumblebee and *Bombus distinguendus* the great yellow bumblebee and three other bees are on the list of Northern Ireland Priority Species published by NIEA in March 2004.

NIEA also co-funded work on the conservation of bees in both Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland that led to the Publication of the Regional Red List of Irish Bees in 2006.

The Agency has not carried out any research specifically on the impact of disease on the number of bumblebees in Northern Ireland.

Climate Scientists

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the source of his claim in the supplementary answer to AQO 325/09, that '44% of

climate scientists disagree with the statement that climate change is mostly the result of man made causes'. (AQW 1030/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My source was the book by Dennis Avery and S. Fred Singer "*Unstoppable Global Warming: Every 1,500 Years*".

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment if the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is aware that a proposal from Northern Ireland Water to pump waste/water from Whitehead and Ballystrudder to Ballycarry will include secondary treatment of this waste. (AQW 1050/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is currently examining Northern Ireland Water's proposal to pump wastewater from Whitehead and Ballystrudder for treatment at Ballycarry. NIEA has only recently received details of the marine modelling for the proposed discharge. NIEA has not yet determined the appropriate level of treatment required to provide the right level of compliance and protection for the receiving waters.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if the sewage and waste/water treatment at Mullaghboy, Islandmagee, complies with Northern Ireland Environment Agency consent standards for discharges into the North Channel; and (ii) what is the level of treatment currently provided. (AQW 1051/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Northern Ireland Water (NIW) is failing to meet the conditions of the Mullaghboy consent to discharge which was issued by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) on 30 March 2007 and which incorporates the requirements of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007. As a result NIEA issued an enforcement notice on this treatment works in June 2008 requiring secondary treatment to be provided by 31 December 2011. This work is now included on the NIW capital works programme.

The current level of treatment provided by Mullaghboy is fine screening.

Bathing Waters

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what decisions have been made in response to the 'Review of Identification of Northern Ireland Bathing Waters' report published in April 2006. (AQW 1052/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Bathing waters were identified at Magilligan (Downhill), Whiterocks (Portrush), Waterfoot, Carnlough, Ballygally, Ballywalter and Murlough Bay (County Down); Cranfield (Nicholson's Strand) was not de-identified; monitoring at four candidate sites (Ballyhalbert, Cushendall, Cushendun and Warrenpoint) was discontinued; and revised criteria for the identification of bathing waters in Northern Ireland was introduced.

Ministers Membership of Belfast City Council

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what assessment he has given to any potential conflict of interest that may arise from his membership of Belfast City Council and his role as Minister in charge of local government; and (ii) what action he will take to address potential conflicts of interest. (AQW 1053/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have already declared publicly my intention to resign as a councillor and that I will determine the timing of my resignation in consultation with party colleagues.

In the meantime, I have confirmed publicly that I will not accept any severance payment which may be put in place for retiring councillors as a result of the Review of Public Administration. There will therefore be no question of any personal conflict of interest in me dealing with any proposals on severance arrangements.

Legislation to List Streets

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 749/09, what legislation exists to list streets in their totality. (AQW 1057/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My previous answer has explained the power to list individual built structures. Collectively these may make up a street and under Article 42(2) of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 ('the Order') 'any respect in which its exterior contributes to the architectural or historic interest of any group of buildings of which it forms part' may be taken into account in this decision.

However, the protection of an area or street following a consideration of its overall interest may be more appropriately carried out under Article 50(1) of the Order. In this the Department of the Environment is given the power to 'designate areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.' Under Article 50(6) of the Order, an area so designated is to be known as a 'Conservation Area'. Powers to control such an area are outlined in Articles 50 to 53 of the Order.

Noise Nuisance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions there have been for noise nuisance in the Larne Borough Council area over the last 5 years. (AQW 1065/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been no prosecutions for noise nuisance in Larne Borough Council over the last five years.

Planning Enforcement Notices

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) how many planning enforcement notices have been served for the breach of planning regulations in the Larne area; and (ii) how many have been enforced, from January 2007 to August 2008. (AQW 1067/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Eleven Enforcement Notices have been served in the Larne area since 1998.
- (ii) None have been served in the 2007 to 2008 period. One case was due in court on 4 July 2008 however, the Enforcement Notice which had been served on 31 January 2006 was complied with and the Court Summons was withdrawn.

Money Returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how much money his Department returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel on 31 March 2008. (AQW 1080/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department returned £14,947,000 to the Department of Finance and Personnel during the 2007-08 financial year.

Quad Bikes

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what opportunities are available to Councils to institute bye-laws prohibiting the use of quad bikes on Council property, such as beaches. (AQW 1085/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Power to make bye-laws regarding Council property depends on whether the legislation under which the Council holds an interest in or acquires the property includes a power enabling the Council to make bye-laws to regulate the use of that property.

The enabling power for the seashore – which includes beaches – is in section 82 of the Public Health

Acts (Amendment) Act 1907. Although most of this Act (including section 82) does not extend to Northern Ireland, a Council may apply to my Department for an Order extending parts or sections of the Act to its district.

It is a matter for each Council to decide whether to apply for such an Order and whether to make provision in bye-laws under section 82 to restrict the use of vehicles on public beaches.

As the foreshore is a reserved matter, additional consent from the Department for Transport is required for bye-laws made under section 82 of the 1907 Act.

Sewerage Infrastructure in Ballynahinch

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what measures have been taken to reduce the risk to the public from poor sewerage infrastructure in Ballynahinch. (AQW 1097/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) regulates discharges from Northern Ireland Water (NIW) Waste Water Treatment Works and sewer systems against standards set by NIEA which incorporate standards set under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (UWWTD).

NIEA has issued consents under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 to NIW for the Ballynahinch collection system which consists of 7 sewage pumping stations and 3 combined sewer overflows and the Ballynahinch Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTW).

Following a medium severity pollution incident caused by a storm overflow, NIEA issued a formal warning letter to NIW in May 2007. The discharges from the WWTW are however currently compliant.

Sewerage Infrastructure in Ballynahinch

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what recommendations the Northern Ireland Environment Agency have made in relation to poor sewerage infrastructure in Ballynahinch. (AQW 1098/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Ballynahinch sewer system is listed on the Northern Ireland Drainage Area Plan and will have a Drainage Area Study carried out by Northern Ireland Water. Northern Ireland Environment Agency will be assessing the impact of overflows from the sewerage system to waterways in the Ballynahinch area in 2009 in order to inform the prioritisation of the Drainage Area Study.

Presbyterian Church on the Cliftonville Road

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment why the Presbyterian Church on the Cliftonville Road, North Belfast, was not spot-listed or protected. (AQW 1100/09)

The Minister of the Environment: To justify the issue of a Building Preservation Notice (BPN) - i.e. to 'spot list' - a historic building, in advance of detailed research and consultation, must 'appear' to my Department that, as well as being under threat, the building is of 'special architectural or historic interest'. This test is laid out in Article 42A of the Planning (Amendment) Order 2003.

This church was subject to a comprehensive survey and consideration for listing in 1986. At that time it was thought not to meet the legislative test required for protection by listing.

As the 1986 survey was so comprehensive, and as the legislative test has not changed in the interim, there was no justification for the serving of a BPN when demolition commenced last week.

Although I appreciate that the loss of this building, which is a local landmark, will be a disappointment to some in the local community, the legislation is clear in the tasks that it sets. Only buildings of 'special architectural or historic interest' can be protected by listing. If they do not make the special test then they cannot be listed.

Planning Permission

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment how many times retrospective planning permission was (i) approved; and (ii) refused, during the period from (a) February 2004 to May 2006; and (b) June 2006 to September 2008. (AQW 1101/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Article 28A of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, as amended, allows for retrospective planning applications to be made i.e. where development has already been carried out.

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 periods 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.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how many page views his Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months.

(AQW 1111/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of page views per month for the last 12 months is given in the following table. The figures provided include page view details for the DOE website as well as those for the sites of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Driver and Vehicle Agency, the Planning Service and Road Safety Northern Ireland

Page Views Trend	
Month	Page Views
October 2007	1,146,056
November 2007	1,086,035
December 2007	1,059,419
January 2008	1,270,768
February 2008	1,079,974
March 2008	795,027
April 2008	936,180
May 2008	1,106,368
June 2008	1,237,178
July 2008	1,034,490
August 2008	1,071,426
September 2008	1,152,960

Irish Hare

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to grant permanent protection for the Irish hare under the review of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. (AQW 1129/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Full statutory protection for the Irish Hare will exist from 1 November 2008 to 31 March 2009 through a temporary Special Protection Order which I have recently approved. In addition, the hare receives full protection during the closed season for game species which runs from 1 April to 11 August each year.

I have not yet made a decision on the need for permanent protection for the Irish Hare.

Irish Hare

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment how much has been spent on renewing the temporary protection order for the Irish hare in each of the last 6 years. (AQW 1132/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The estimated costs incurred by my Department on making the Special Protection Orders in each of the last 6 years are set out in the table below. The costs for staff time are general estimates as specific records are not kept.

Year	Cost of surveys	Staff time	Advertising & printing costs
2003	No survey	£1,400	£775*
2004	£30,000	£1,450	£800*
2005	£30,000	£1,500	£825*
2006	£30,000	£1,550	£850
2007	£30,000	£1,600	£885
2008	£30,000	£1,650	£930

* costs for advertising/printing is not readily available for 2003-2005; amounts are based on estimates.

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment 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 1134/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I did not meet with Professor Bain about his review into relocation of Public-sector jobs. Professor Bain did however meet DOE Departmental officials to discuss the principles underpinning his review. The discussion did not cover the relocation of any specific jobs within the Department.

Marine Bill

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the progress made by the Interdepartmental Steering Group on developing the policy and legislative framework for the Marine Bill. (AQW 1149/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Interdepartmental Steering Group comprising officials from DOE, DARD, DETI, and DCAL met on 9 April 2008 and agreed its Terms of Reference.

Since then the Group has facilitated the agreement of a composite Northern Ireland response to the draft UK Marine Bill and the publication in Northern Ireland in June 2008 of the Defra-led consultation on High Level Marine Objectives.

The Group will continue to play a key role in the development of policies leading to the introduction of new marine legislation in Northern Ireland.

Marine Bill

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment what consultation has been carried out with fishing stakeholders on the Marine Bill. (AQW 1150/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Arlene Foster discussed the environmental aspects of the Marine Bill with representatives from the main fishing industry organisations in March 2008. This was followed by a briefing from officials in June 2008. Fishing interests along with other stakeholders also had the opportunity to comment on the UK Government's draft Marine Bill which extends in part to Northern Ireland. There will also be an opportunity for fishing stakeholders to contribute to the development of policies leading to the introduction of new marine legislation in Northern Ireland.

New Local Council Areas

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what provision is being made for the renaming of the proposed new local council areas; and (ii) under what circumstances this will be considered. (AQW 1156/09)

The Minister of the Environment: On 17 September 2008, the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner announced his Provisional Recommendations for the boundaries and names of the eleven new local government districts in Northern Ireland and their constituent wards.

There is now an opportunity for interested parties to make representations on the proposed boundaries and names either at public hearings or in writing.

Written representations should be made by 12 November 2008.

By the end of November 2008, a series of public hearings will be held in each of the new local government districts, providing an opportunity for oral representations before Assistant Local Government Boundaries Commissioners.

It is not a requirement for an oral representation to have been preceded by a written representation.

If, upon considering all representations made to him, the Commissioner decides to modify his recommendations regarding the provisional name or boundaries of a district or ward, he must publish details of the revised proposals in at least 2 newspapers circulating in the district, and invite written representations on those proposals by a given date.

The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner will consider all representations before submitting a report on his Final Recommendations to my Department. The Commissioner's report is to be submitted by 30 June 2009.

Following submission of the Commissioner's report, my Department will lay the report before the Assembly with a draft order giving effect, with or without modifications, to the recommendations contained in the report. Where modifications are proposed, my Department will provide a statement of the reasons for the modifications. Approval of the draft order by a resolution of the Assembly is required for the new boundaries and district and ward names to come into effect.

Section 51 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 permits a council to apply to the Department for its names to be changed by order, if they so wish. It will be a matter for the new councils to decide whether they wish to avail of this provision in future years.

Proposed Incineration Facility

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the planning process for the proposed incineration facility at Ballyvannon Rd, Glenavy. (AQW 1157/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The planning application for a proposed biomass fuelled power plant at Ballyvannon Road, Glenavy was received by Planning Service on 4 June 2008. Article 31 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 was applied to the application, on 23 September 2008, designating the proposal a major application.

The application has been advertised and representations continue to be received. The application is still under consideration with the consultation process underway.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if he has approved any new Areas of Special Scientific Interest in the Upper Bann constituency in the last financial year; and (ii) if any are being considered for adoption in the next 2 years. (AQW 1158/09)

The Minister of the Environment: No Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) were declared in the Upper Bann constituency in the last financial year.

Consideration is being given to declaring two ASSIs in the constituency during the next two years.

Clea Lakes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to retain (i) birdlife; (ii) fish stock; and (iii) flora and fauna, at the Clea lakes, Shrigley, given the falling water levels. (AQW 1175/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has no legal obligations to maintain water levels at Clea Lakes, Shrigley, and has not taken any direct action to retain the birdlife, fish stocks and flora and fauna. However, the site remains a proposed Site of Local Nature Conservation Interest in the draft Ards and Down Area Plan.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment 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. (AQW 1192/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Records are kept of carbon usage in the Department, for example, CO₂ emissions from air and car travel are regularly monitored by the Departmental Board.

The Department is involved in a wide range of projects relating to carbon offsetting. These include:

- The introduction of a Sustainable Travel Plan from April 2008, developed in partnership with DRD Roads Service.
- The restoration of hydroelectric power at Roe Valley Country Park to supply all electricity needs at the Visitor Centre.
- The implementation of energy conservation measures at five Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) sites.
- The procurement of 100% green electricity for eleven NIEA sites, with additional sites under consideration.
- The roll out of an Environmental Management System to increase energy management and sustainable development awareness in the Department.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Treatment Centre

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the planning application to build a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Treatment Centre on the Ballyclare Road, Templepatrick. (AQW 1208/09)

The Minister of the Environment: On 14 December 2006 Capio UK Health Care (now Cygnet Health Care) submitted an application for full planning permission for the demolition of an existing dwelling and erection of a Use Class C3 Residential Institution for child and adolescent care at 182 Templepatrick Road, Ballyclare, BT39 0RA.

Planning Service officials have met the applicant and his agents on four occasions the most recent being on 22 September 2008. Following that meeting, the applicant submitted a further supporting planning statement on 2 October 2008. This is now being considered by Planning Service.

Planning Service requested additional information from the applicant's agent in relation to issues raised by Roads Service which has not been submitted to date.

Water Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 669/09, to detail the total amount of money offenders have been fined for polluting rivers and other waterways in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) the South Antrim constituency, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1210/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Table 1 below sets out the total fines awarded by the Courts for successful water pollution cases throughout Northern Ireland over the past five years.

TABLE 1

Year	Amount
2003	£90,061.71
2004	£84,956.63
2005	£42,862.68
2006*	£53,600
2007#	£18,700

*2006 – 6 Cases still pending

#2007 – 35 Cases still pending

Table 2 below sets out the total fines awarded by the Courts for successful water pollution cases for catchments in the South Antrim area over the past five years.

TABLE 2

Year	Amount
2003	£3,000
2004	£2,500
2005	£400
2006*	£1,350
2007#	0

* 1 Case still pending

1 Case still pending

Marine Protected Areas

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department will ensure that important habitats and biodiversity are not compromised before the designation of Marine Protected Areas, between the introduction of the UK Marine Act 2009 and the implementation of revised legislation in 2011/12. (AQW 1238/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A number of marine protected areas have already been established in our territorial waters to safeguard important habitats and species of European importance, under the Habitats and Birds Directives. These areas include Strangford Lough, Murlough Bay, Carlingford Lough, Belfast Lough, Larne Lough and the waters around Rathlin Island.

Research is currently being carried out to identify additional sites for possible designation in the next few years to complete our EU obligations; which is the priority for my Department within the marine environment.

Climate Change

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department has taken to implement the motion agreed by the Assembly on 10 December 2007, to extend the provisions of the Climate Change Bill to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1304/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has and continues to progress actions in relation to the UK Climate Change Bill and the provisions which will apply to Northern Ireland.

Climate Change

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what his Department's budgetary commitment is

to the work of the Climate Change Committee in 2008/09. (AQW 1305/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's budgetary commitment for the work of the Committee on Climate Change for 2008/09 is £105, 683.

Climate Change

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has held with (i) Departmental officials; and (ii) colleagues in the Executive, on the issue of climate change. (AQW 1332/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I regularly communicate with my officials and Executive colleagues on the issue of climate change.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment what funding is available from his Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1346/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no funding available from my Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children.

Icelandic Banks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment whether any local government councils hold deposits with Icelandic banks. (AQW 1408/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that none of the 26 district councils in Northern Ireland holds deposits with Icelandic banks.

Brent Geese

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any figures for Brent Geese numbers in Strangford Lough in September 2008. (AQW 1430/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Counts co-ordinated by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust recorded the following numbers of Light-bellied Brent Geese on Strangford Lough through September 2008:-

- 5 September 2008 – 2,000 birds;
- 19 September 2008 – 7,800 birds; and
- 26 September 2008 – 11,690 birds.

As peak numbers of Light-bellied Brent Geese do not arrive at Strangford Lough until October, more recent information for this month is also provided:-

- 3 October 2008 – 26,700 birds; and
- 10 October 2008 – 25,000 birds.

Allotments

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 575/09, if he will make this data on allotments available to all Assembly Members. (AQW 1449/09)

The Minister of the Environment: On receipt of the data about allotments from councils, I will arrange for a copy of the information to be made available in the Assembly Library.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Utility Regulation Board

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans she has to (i) review the make-up of the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation board; and (ii) appoint local representatives to the board. (AQW 946/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): The majority of the current members of the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) were appointed in October 2006 for a period of three years and these appointments are not due to expire until the end of September 2009. The appointment of the Chairman, who was appointed for a period of four years in 2006 and of one member, who was appointed in 2007, will not expire until 2010. My Department will therefore (i) be consulting with the Chairman of the NIAUR in developing plans to appoint members to the Authority in 2009; and (ii) the issue of local representation will be one of those which will be considered in that context.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel 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. (AQW 1103/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department maintains records of carbon emissions from energy use in buildings within the Government estate in Northern Ireland. The Department also records carbon emissions generated by air travel on official DFP business.

There are currently no plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken.

OFMdfM has responsibility for leading on sustainable development strategy across the NI Departments and as such favours further evaluation and consideration before any such scheme would be adopted. Off-setting should only be considered after all effective measures to reduce emissions have been exhausted.

Steps to Work Programme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Foyle and North West contracts for the Steps to Work programme; and when a final decision will be made on these contracts. (AQO 788/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The procurement process has not been concluded in these remaining two areas. New bids have been received for the Foyle Area and the evaluation panel will be assessing these shortly. In the North West confirmation has been received in respect of subcontracting arrangements from the new Preferred Bidder.

The indicative date by which it is hoped to reach a conclusion on these two remaining areas is mid November.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Central Services Agency

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently employed in the Central Services Agency. (AQW 635/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The Central Services Agency have advised that, as at September 2008, they directly employed 642 staff.

Ambulances

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average (i) age; and (ii) mileage, of ambulances. (AQW 731/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Vehicle type	Average age	Average mileage
A&E ambulances	5.6	133,592
Patient Care Services Vehicles	4.8	101,160

Ambulances

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the year of manufacture of each ambulance in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 745/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Vehicle Type	Date of Registration	Number
A&E ambulance	1998	3
	1999	1
	2000	3
	2001	4
	2002	1
	2003	5
	2004	4
	2006	5
Patient Care Services Vehicle	2000	5
	2001	9
	2003	4
	2006	3
	2008	3
Rapid Response Vehicle	2002	1
	2005	1
	2006	1
	2007	1

Ambulance Service Staff

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Ambulance Service staff reside in (i) Cookstown; and (ii) Magherafelt District Council areas. (AQW 763/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below details the number of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service staff who reside in Cookstown and Magherafelt. The information has been sourced on the basis of postcodes with BT80

representing Cookstown and BT44, BT45 and BT46 together representing Magherafelt. Area of residence does not necessarily correlate with where a person is stationed.

Council Area	Number of NIAS Staff Resident
Cookstown	12
Magherafelt	18

Health Centres

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's policy on health centres that do not comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and continue to wait for capital investment through Developing Better Services, in order to meet legislative requirements.

(AQW 794/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Health and Social Care Trusts are required to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. This applies to all buildings including health centres. Whilst an annual capital allocation is made to each Health and Social Care Trust to address estate related requirements many of the facilities within this sector could benefit from additional infrastructure investment.

As I have indicated in my answer to AQW 795/09 which relates specifically to Ballycastle Health Centre, the Trust is currently assessing what can be done within the current budget to address these issues.

Ballycastle Health Centre

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the development of a replacement building for Ballycastle Health Centre has been delayed; and whether the centre's inability to offer adequate disability access to patients makes it suitable for development under the Developing Better Services capital investment programme. (AQW 795/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This project is included in the Primary & Community Care Infrastructure Programme (PCCI), having been identified by the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Northern HSC Trust as one of a number of such schemes to be implemented as part of the PCCI Programme in the Northern Trust area.

I share the concerns about the lack of provision of facilities for people with disabilities at Ballycastle Health Centre, which is below that which I, and indeed the NHSSB Board, would like to see. I understand

that the Northern HSC Trust has undertaken work to improve the facilities at Ballycastle Health Centre and that the Trust has met with both GP practices in the Centre and is reviewing what work could be done to improve the existing facilities.

As I outlined in the Adjournment Debate on 30 September if my Department is unable to proceed with the investment of a new Health and Care Centre in Ballycastle, due to the constraints on capital funding, within a reasonable period, I will examine carefully the existing premises and see what work can be carried out in order to alleviate pressures on doctors and patients.

Education Welfare Officers

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the differences in salaries between education welfare officers and qualified social workers. (AQW 919/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are two very separate pay systems in operation in the HSC and the education sector and clearly both will provide for different rates of pay and terms and conditions of employment. Qualified social workers in the HSC are paid under the Agenda for Change arrangements in line with other health care workers. Pay for education welfare officers employed in the education sector is a matter for the Education Minister.

Dangers of Eating Junk Food

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to increase public awareness of the dangers of eating junk food on a regular basis. (AQW 921/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Tackling obesity in Northern Ireland is a high priority for my Department, and we now have in place a cross Departmental and cross sector Obesity Prevention Steering Group. One of the functions of this group is to drive forward the Fit Futures strategy aimed at tackling childhood obesity, but we are also determined to address obesity across the whole life course. The steering group and its supporting advisory groups will be able to make recommendations concerning public information and education campaigns, and although at this stage no particular issues or target groups have been identified, a 'healthy eating' message is clearly one we will be keen to promote.

Whole-Time Firefighters

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of the recent intake of whole-time firefighters are from; (i) Catholic community; (ii) Protestant community; (iii) other religions. (AQW 924/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is in the table below:

Intake	Catholic	Protestant	Other
8 September 2008	48%	39%	13%

Whole-Time Firefighters

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what percentage of interviewees from each of the 3 interview panels, were successful in the recent intake of whole-time firefighters. (AQW 925/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is given in the table below:

Intake	Panel I	Panel II	Panel III
8 September 2008	13%	33%	54%

Whole-Time Firefighters

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the maximum time that successful candidates for positions of whole-time firefighters can be held on a waiting list, before the list becomes invalid. (AQW 926/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service list of successful candidates would normally expire at the end of 12 months from date of last interview. However, all of the successful candidates in the recent whole-time recruitment exercise will be offered appointments to vacancies as they arise and subject to available funding, even if this takes longer than 12 months.

Attacks on Fire and Rescue Service Crews

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) attacks on Fire and Rescue Service crews; and (ii) officers injured in these attacks, in each of the last 12 months, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 928/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The attached tables detail the information requested for the period 1 September 2007 to 31 August 2008.

TABLE 1 - ALL ATTACKS ON FIREFIGHTERS FOR THE PERIOD 1 SEPTEMBER 2007 TO 31 AUGUST 2008

Parliamentary Constituency	Sep 07	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Total
Belfast East	1	3	1		4	4	4	1	8	4	3		33
Belfast North	1	2	4	2	1		2	2	5	4	5	2	30
Belfast South	6	4	2	4	1	7	5	6	5	4	5	1	50
Belfast West	3	4	2	4	1	1	2		2			3	22
East Antrim		1								1			2
East Londonderry	1	1									5	1	8
Ferm / South Tyrone			2				1				1	1	5
Foyle		4	1		1	4	2	4	1	6	9	6	38
Lagan Valley		1											1
Mid Ulster		1									1		2
Newry and Armagh		6		1	1		1		1	1		1	12
North Antrim								4		1			5
North Down		2							3	1	1		7

Parliamentary Constituency	Sep 07	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Total
South Antrim	3	3					1		2		3		12
South Down	1	9				2		1			1		14
Strangford	1				2								3
Upper Bann	2	3				1					1	1	8
West Tyrone													
Total	19	44	12	11	11	19	18	18	27	22	35	16	252

TABLE 2 - NUMBER OF FIREFIGHTERS INJURED FROM TABLE 1 INCIDENTS.

Parliamentary Const	Feb 08	Aug 08
Belfast East	1	
Belfast South		2
Newry and Armagh		1
Total	1	3

Calls Received by the Fire and Rescue Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) emergency calls; and (ii) hoax calls, received by the Fire and Rescue Service in the last year, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 929/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The attached table details the information requested for the period 1 September 2007 to 31 August 2008. The emergency calls figure is inclusive of hoax calls.

Parliamentary Constituency	Emergency Calls	Hoax Calls
Belfast East	2501	114
Belfast North	3263	144
Belfast South	5611	219
Belfast West	3217	149
East Antrim	1962	32
East Londonderry	2432	90
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	2484	77
Foyle	3724	160
Lagan Valley	1806	29
Mid Ulster	1123	43

Parliamentary Constituency	Emergency Calls	Hoax Calls
Newry & Armagh	2868	148
North Antrim	2272	81
North Down	1960	79
South Antrim	4003	120
South Down	4250	125
Strangford	1873	43
Upper Bann	2663	84
West Tyrone	1772	85
Unknown	3409	2400

Muckamore Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients are currently living at Muckamore Hospital. (AQW 932/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total number of patients currently living at Muckamore Hospital at 30 September 2008 is 270.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients were seen at the Accident and Emergency departments in (i) Altnagelvin Hospital; (ii) Enniskillen Hospital; and (iii) the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital, in each of the first nine months of 2008. (AQW 987/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of attendances at the Accident and Emergency departments in (i) Altnagelvin Hospital; (ii) Enniskillen Hospital; and (iii) the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital, in the first six months of 2008

(the quarter ending June 2008 is the latest quarter for which information is available), is outlined below.

Hospital	Attendances at A&E from January 2008 to June 2008
Altnagelvin	26,008
Erne	11,656
Tyrone County	11,761

Source: Departmental Return KH09 (Part 2)

Consultant Cardiologists and Gastroenterologists

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the number of (i) consultant cardiologists; and (ii) gastroenterologists, based at (a) Altnagelvin Hospital; (b) Enniskillen Hospital; and (c) Omagh Hospital, for each of the years 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/8. (AQW 989/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is given in the tables below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CONSULTANT CARDIOLOGISTS EMPLOYED IN (A) ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITAL; (B) ERNE HOSPITAL, ENNISKILLEN; AND (C) TYRONE COUNTY HOSPITAL, OMAGH IN 2005/06, 2006/07 AND 2007/08.

Year	Altnagelvin Hospital		Erne Hospital		Tyrone County Hospital	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
2005/06	3	3.0	1	1.0	*	*
2006/07	4	3.5	1	1.0	*	*
2007/08	4	4.0	1	1.0	*	*

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

1. Tyrone County Hospital have 2 physicians who hold a Cardiology Clinic each week
2. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF GASTROENTEROLOGISTS EMPLOYED IN (A) ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITAL; (B) ERNE HOSPITAL, ENNISKILLEN; AND (C) TYRONE COUNTY HOSPITAL, OMAGH IN 2005/06, 2006/07 AND 2007/08.

Year	Altnagelvin Hospital		Erne Hospital		Tyrone County Hospital	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
2005/06	3	3.0	1	1.0	0	0.0
2006/07	3	3.0	1	1.0	0	0.0
2007/08	3	3.0	1	1.0	0	0.0

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Note: WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Fire Engine Fleet

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the size of the fire engine fleet for the last 5 years. (AQW 1001/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below details the information requested.

Fire Engine Fleet	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Front line pumps	111	111	111	112	112
Specials	36	41	36	37	39

Fire Engine Fleet	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Other pumps	23	25	25	25	25
Totals	170	177	172	174	176

Ambulance Fleet

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the size of the ambulance fleet for the last 5 years. (AQW 1002/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table.

Year	A&E ambulances
2004	137
2005	140
2006	140
2007	132
2008	132

Foyleville Nursing Home

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in respect of the Foyleville nursing home, (i) the total number of permanent and respite beds; (ii) the occupancy levels of permanent and respite beds; and (iii) if there is a waiting list for older people to obtain a permanent or respite bed.

(AQW 1012/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has advised that Foyleville Residential Home has 22 permanent and 3 respite beds. There are currently 10 permanent and 2 respite beds occupied. There is no waiting list for obtaining beds, however, there may be occasions when the home cannot operate at full capacity dependent on staffing levels.

People with Epilepsy

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for a breakdown of (a) adults; and (b) children, with epilepsy in each parliamentary constituency; and (ii) what services are available to these individuals in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 1014/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Statistical information on the number of adults and children with epilepsy in each constituency is not available.

People suffering from epilepsy have access to care and treatment from an appropriate part of the Health and Social Care sector depending on their individual needs, ranging from local primary and community care and neurology services to specialist regional neurology services delivered by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

In January 2008, my 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.

CT Scanner at Tyrone County Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people per year, who have been examined using the CT scanner at the Tyrone County Hospital, since its installation.

(AQW 1031/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients who have been examined using the CT scanner at Tyrone County Hospital each year, since its installation in July 2004, is provided in the table below.

Year	Number of patients scanned
20041	1,272
2005	2,108
2006	2,295
2007	2,826
20082	2,446
Total	10,947

1 Figures for 2004 include all patients scanned from July 2004 when the scanner was installed.

2 Figures for 2008 include all patients up to and including 30 September 2008.

CT Scanner at Tyrone County Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the actions taken by the Western Health and Social Care Trust to (i) raise the profile of the CT scanner; and (ii) maximise the use of the CT scanner, at the Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh.

(AQW 1032/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The safe and efficient use of complex clinical equipment such as a CT scanner is a matter for the Trust involved taking into account the needs of patients, clinical judgement and the target I have set for diagnostic tests, which is that from April 2008 no patient should wait longer than 13 weeks for a diagnostic test, reducing to 9 weeks by March 2009.

I have been advised by the Western Health and Social Care Trust that utilisation of the service and capacity available on all scanning facilities in the Trust area is kept under constant review to ensure

equitable access to scanning, whilst balancing the service needs and needs of the local communities served.

Consultant Numbers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many consultants have

been employed in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1036/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

Information on the number of Consultants employed in Northern Ireland Health and Social Care by Trust area in each of the last five years is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CONSULTANTS EMPLOYED IN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE BY TRUST AREA AS AT 31 MARCH 2004 - 2008.

Trust	March 2004		March 2005		March 2006		March 2007		March 2008	
	HC	WTE	HC	WTE	HC	WTE	HC	WTE	HC	WTE
Belfast	458	424.2	481	446.2	507	481.7	544	514.6	552	521.4
Northern	126	123.7	140	125.6	158	151.5	175	168.9	181	165.7
South Eastern	150	144.8	154	148.5	168	162.9	170	163.5	167	160.6
Southern	127	123.2	134	129.2	140	136.8	151	146.7	164	157.8
Western	154	150.0	150	144.4	161	157.1	171	166.6	187	183.2
Board HQs & Other Organisations	47	31.0	52	34.9	52	38.3	55	38.9	55	39.1
Total	1,062	996.9	1,111	1,028.8	1,186	1,128.3	1,266	1,199.2	1,306	1,227.9

Source: Human Resources Management System

Notes:

1. HC = Headcount.
2. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
3. Trusts were formally merged into the current 5 HSC Trust structure on 1st April 2007 - data prior to this are presented based on the new organisational structures for consistency purposes.

People With Hearing Difficulties

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reduce waiting lists for (i) appointments with specialists; (ii) hearing aid fittings; and (iii) operations, in relation to people with hearing difficulties. (AQW 1042/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is taking forward a comprehensive programme of reform and investment to transform waiting times for all patients, including those with hearing difficulties. In April 2006, nearly 15,000 patients were waiting more than 13 weeks to see an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist; today no ENT patient is waiting longer than 13 weeks and I have set a target to reduce the maximum outpatient waiting time for all patients to nine weeks by March 2009. Waiting times for ENT operations have also been transformed: the number of patients waiting more than 21 weeks for ENT surgery has fallen from 1,100 in April 2006 to zero today, and I have set a target to reduce the maximum waiting for surgery for all patients to 13 weeks by March 2009. My Department has established a Service Delivery Unit to work with

Trusts and Commissioners to ensure that appropriate progress continues to be made towards the new targets.

Steps have also been taken to ensure more timely access to hearing aids through the provision of additional hearing aid fitting, rehabilitation and repair clinics.

Hospital Car Parking

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) those hospitals whose car parking service is provided by outside operators; (ii) the names of the operators; and (iii) the conditions attached to each car parking operation. (AQW 1046/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The Royal Group of Hospitals is the only HSC Hospital where a car parking service is provided by an outside operator
- (ii) The operator is *Car Park Services*
- (iii) It is operated under conditions in PFI contract which runs to 2017

Hospital Car Parking

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the money generated by car parking fees at each hospital, over the past 3 years. (AQW 1047/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Royal Group of Hospitals Car Park is a PFI scheme and therefore no income is generated by the Trust through the operation of the car park by the PFI provider. Altnagelvin Hospital, Ulster Hospital, Belfast City Hospital and the Mater Hospital are the only other hospitals which have charged for car parking over the past three years and the income generated over this period is as follows:

Hospital	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Altnagelvin Hospital	Nil	84,000	146,000
Ulster Hospital	497,000	538,000	840,000
Belfast City Hospital	627,000	726,000	891,000
Mater Hospital	116,000	108,000	86,000

People Diagnosed with Lymphoedema

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are diagnosed with lymphoedema. (AQW 1062/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not available.

Defibrillators

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures he is taking to ensure that defibrillators are placed in all public buildings. (AQW 1063/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has no statutory responsibility to ensure that defibrillators are placed in all public buildings.

The responsibility for deciding whether to provide a defibrillator and train staff in its use lies with an individual organisation. A decision should be made after conducting a well-documented risk assessment at the site in question. A number of factors need to be taken into account including the number of people using a facility and the risk of cardiac arrest occurring at the site. If a decision is made to provide defibrillators for use by trained lay staff, responsibility again lies with

the individual organisation to ensure adequate initial training and on-going refresher training on their use.

Capitation Formula

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact the change in the capitation formula will have on the community. (AQW 1064/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Regional Capitation Formula assesses the health and social care needs of the NI population.

An analysis of the impact of the proposed new formula shows that more resources will be targeted at deprived areas than previously due to the update of the additional needs weightings. It will also skew more money, than the current formula, towards areas with high elderly populations, irrespective of their deprivation level, due to the update of the age/gender weights. Overall, it is felt that the revised formula will provide for a fairer distribution of resources than the current version in line with the principle of equal resource for equal need.

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many page views his Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1077/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the number of page views on the DHSSPS website (www.dhsspsni.gov.uk) in each of the last 12 months.

Month	Total Number of Page Views
September 2008	222,003
August 2008	164,380
July 2008	166,924
June 2008	189,581
May 2008	149,397
April 2008	162,611
March 2008	164,156
February 2008	179,541
January 2008	219,528
December 2007	119,681
November 2007	183,595
October 2007	200,153

Ambulances

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) type, of ambulances in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1126/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has 69 ambulances based in its Northern Division which has the same boundaries as the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. The details requested are shown in the table below.

Vehicle type	No.
A & E Ambulance	36
Rapid Response Vehicle	5
Patient Care Services Vehicle	28

Ambulances

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money his Department has invested in ambulance provision in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1127/09)

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 Northern Health and Social Services Board is shown in the table below.

Year	Funding (£million)
2004/05	7.42
2005/06	8.085
2006/07	10.76
2007/08	10.994
2008/09*	12.026

* projected

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 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 1145/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) None
- (ii) None

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 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. (AQW 1153/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not keep records of carbon usage. The Department does not have plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken.

The matter of carbon usage is considered within the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sustainable Development Programme, which is led by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will follow any plans and guidance that may be issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel in the future.

Executive Meetings

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what health issues are being delayed as a result of the failure to hold Executive meetings. (AQW 1161/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Three papers from my Department are awaiting Executive consideration:

- (i) Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan;
- (ii) "Families Matter" – Supporting Families in Northern Ireland; and
- (iii) The Executive response to the Report of Assembly Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee's Inquiry on Suicide and Self Harm.

Prescription Charges

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why his statement on prescription charges was not made in the Assembly Chamber. (AQW 1166/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It would have been my wish to bring this decision first to the Executive and then to the Assembly, and it is a matter of great regret to me that so far I have not been able to do this. In the absence of a meeting of the Executive, and given that every other part of the United Kingdom had committed to abolishing charges at least for cancer patients, I felt that the Regional Cancer Unit at Belfast City Hospital was the most appropriate venue for making the historic announcement on the phased abolition of prescription charges in Northern Ireland, to emphasise that my decision will make access to medication easier for all, including patients with cancer. Since I have become Health Minister I have been lobbied consistently by cancer patients and their representative organisations to abolish prescription charges. I am glad that my decision has been so warmly welcomed by these and other groups representative of people living with a very wide range of chronic conditions.

I should repeat, however, that my decision remains subject to discussion at the Executive, where I fully expect strong support from Ministerial colleagues.

Antrim Hospital

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients

admitted to Antrim Hospital in each of the last 3 years have a home address in Larne. (AQW 1170/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of *admissions to Antrim Hospital who gave a home address in Larne in each of the last three years for which information is available are as follows.

Year	Number of admissions	% of total admissions to Antrim Hospital
2004/2005	3,542	7.5%
2005/2006	3,350	6.8%
2006/2007	3,467	6.8%

* Admissions are approximated using total deaths and discharges. These figures do not equate to individuals, as a person may be admitted to hospital more than once in a year or across a number of years.

Health Service Dentists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 390/09, to provide the addresses of the 42 Health Service dentists in East Derry/Londonderry and 46 Health Service dentists in Foyle constituency. (AQW 1174/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(1) ADDRESSES OF SURGERIES LOCATED IN THE EAST LONDONDERRY CONSTITUENCY IN WHICH THE 42 HEALTH SERVICE DENTISTS CURRENTLY PRACTISE.

Address 1	Address 2	Postcode	Constituency
11 Irish Green Street	Garvagh, Limavady	BT49 9AA	East Londonderry
110 Main Street	Coleraine	BT51 5AD	East Londonderry
14 Railway Road	Coleraine	BT52 1PD	East Londonderry
19 Central Avenue	Portstewart	BT55 7BP	East Londonderry
3 Lodge Road	Coleraine	BT52 1LU	East Londonderry
38 Catherine Street	Limavady	BT49 9DB	East Londonderry
39 New Row	Coleraine	BT52 1AE	East Londonderry
58 Railway Road	Coleraine	BT52 1PF	East Londonderry
6 Lodge Road	Coleraine	BT52 1NB	East Londonderry
62 Catherine Street	Limavady	BT49 9DB	East Londonderry
6a Lever Road	Portstewart	BT55 7EF	East Londonderry
7 Waterside	Coleraine	BT51 3DP	East Londonderry
78 Main Street	Dungiven	BT47 4LG	East Londonderry
95 Eglinton Street	Portrush	BT56 8DZ	East Londonderry
Bovally Dental Practice	Bovally, Limavady	BT49 0TA	East Londonderry

Address 1	Address 2	Postcode	Constituency
Causeway Ortho / Centre	12 Sandel Village, Coleraine	BT52 1WW	East Londonderry
Kilrea Dental Surgery	33 Maghera Street, Kilrea	BT51 5QL	East Londonderry

Source: Central Services Agency

(II) ADDRESSES OF SURGERIES LOCATED IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY IN WHICH THE 46 HEALTH SERVICE DENTISTS CURRENTLY PRACTISE.

Address1	Address2	Postcode	Constituency
1 Queen Street	Londonderry	BT48 7EF	Foyle
1 St Patrick's Terrace	Buncrana Road, Londonderry	BT48 7QR	Foyle
1 Sydney Terrace	Gt James Street, Londonderry	BT48 7DQ	Foyle
13 Clarendon Street	Derry	BT48 7EP	Foyle
17 Glendermott Road	Londonderry	BT47 1BB	Foyle
23 Cherry Drive	Eglinton	BT47 3US	Foyle
25 Clarendon Street	Derry	BT48 7EP	Foyle
30 Clooney Terrace	Londonderry	BT47 6AR	Foyle
46 Clarendon Street	Londonderry	BT48 7ET	Foyle
47 Clarendon Street	Londonderry	BT48 7ER	Foyle
4a Woodburn Park	Londonderry	BT47 1PS	Foyle
59 Abercorn Road	Londonderry	BT48 6TQ	Foyle
7 Ebrington Terrace	Londonderry	BT47 6JS	Foyle
8 Clarendon Street	Londonderry	BT48 7ET	Foyle
86 Spencer Road	Londonderry	BT47 1AG	Foyle
87 Strand Road	Londonderry	BT48 7NN	Foyle
Bishop St Dental Care	Bishop Street, Londonderry	BT48 6PR	Foyle
Unit 8 Spencer House	Spencer Road, Londonderry	BT47 1AA	Foyle

Source: Central Services Agency

Note: Individual dentists may work in more than one surgery within a constituency, and may also work in surgeries located in other constituencies.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to review the changes that have resulted in local pharmacies cutting back on the Minor Ailments Service.

(AQW 1185/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A key component of the enhanced Minor Ailments Service rolled out on 1 August 2008 was that a review of the service, including the remuneration model, was to be carried out following a 6 month period of operation,.

I met recently with representatives of the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee and gave them my personal assurance this would be carried out. This is a sensible approach and allows for any evaluation to

be made on the basis of information gathered over the 6 month period.

I would encourage contractors to provide this worthwhile service and bring any concerns they have following operation of the service to the review process.

Minor Ailments Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Minor Ailment Service consultations have been carried out by pharmacies in each year since 2005. (AQW 1186/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Across Northern Ireland 24,000 consultations were delivered in the last five months of 05/06, 116,000 in the year 06/07 and 182,000 in 07/08.

Paediatric Tonsillectomies

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if provision is made for paediatric tonsillectomies in the proposed new enhanced hospital in Omagh. (AQW 1234/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The proposed Omagh Local Enhanced hospital will not support inpatient surgical services, for children. Paediatric ENT inpatient services will be provided at Altnagelvin hospital. The proposed Omagh Local Enhanced hospital will however provide ENT outpatient services and day procedures for children.

The new Proposed Omagh Local Enhanced hospital will provide 70 to 80% of the hospital services required by the local population and will play a key role in supporting the acute hospitals in the Western Trust.

Thrombolysis Drug

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on how many occasions the thrombolysis drug has been used to treat coronary patients before their transfer to an acute hospital, in the last 12 months, by (i) month; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 1239/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of occasions on which the thrombolysis drug has been used to treat coronary patients before their transfer to an acute hospital, is not available.

Removal of Paediatric ENT from Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what level of consultation took place with medical staff, patients, and elected representatives, prior to the removal of paediatric ENT, from the Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 1249/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision to cease paediatric tonsillectomies at the Tyrone County Hospital was made in the interests of patient safety and emanated from recommendations arising from the Risk and Governance service reviews carried out in the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust.

I understand that the outcome of the Risk and Governance service reviews was shared with the staff and the public.

Waiting Time for Cataract Removal

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting time for cataract removal from initial referral to surgery. (AQW 1294/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the waiting time for cataract removal from initial referral for a first outpatient assessment to surgery is not collected centrally by the Department.

The Department does collect information on the waiting time for cataract surgery at Health and Social Care hospitals in Northern Ireland, from the date on which a decision to admit a patient for cataract surgery is taken, to the date on which the patient is admitted to hospital for that procedure.

The inpatient waiting time position, for cataract surgery, at 30th June 2008, is outlined in the table below.

	Time Waiting in Weeks			
	0 - 6	> 6 - 13	> 13 - 21	> 21
No. of people waiting for admission to hospital in NI for cataract surgery	1075	1194	416	0

Source: DHSSPS Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset.

Organ Donation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans in relation to an opt-out system for organ donation. (AQW 1297/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Organ Donation Taskforce is looking at the issue of presumed consent for organ donation on a UK wide basis and Northern Ireland is represented. The Taskforce is considering what measures might be required to introduce a system of presumed consent and whether this would result in an increase in the number of organ donors. As part of this process, the Taskforce is also considering public attitudes to presumed consent and in July 2008, held a public event in Belfast at which this issue was addressed.

The Taskforce report is expected to be published shortly.

Firework Related Injuries

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many firework related

injuries there were over the Halloween period in each of the last 5 years; and to outline his strategy for alerting the public to the dangers of fireworks.

(AQW 1450/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients reporting to A&E Departments and Minor Injuries Units with injuries from fireworks, since 2003, over a selected 4-5 week period covering the end of October and start of November (Halloween period) is detailed in the table below.

Year	Number of Firework Injuries
2003	45
2004	55
2005	86
2006	69
2007	97

My Department sponsors the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which works in partnership with a range of agencies to promote and deliver Community Safety messages in relation to fireworks. New educational material has been produced, supported by C2K, Police Service NI (PSNI), Education Boards, Local Council Environmental Health Officers, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, my Department and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), which has a dedicated website covering fireworks safety and the related legislation.

Jointly an annual television and radio campaign is funded along with outdoor material. This year's Firework Safety Campaign was launched on 7 October at Whitla St fire station in Belfast with children from two local schools in attendance. The campaign is a combined effort involving the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and a number of other agencies, including RoSPA and also the PSNI who are responsible for enforcing the legislation that requires licences for the sale and use of fireworks.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Cookstown Bypass

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on plans for the Cookstown bypass. (AQW 1009/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Consultants engaged to take forward

the Cookstown Bypass are currently working on the identification of a Preferred Route Corridor.

This work is at an advanced stage, and it is anticipated that the Preferred Route Corridor will be on display at a Public Consultation Day later this financial year. This will provide an opportunity for the public to provide comment and express their views to Roads Service and its consultants.

A detailed assessment of a Preferred Route Alignment within the Preferred Route Corridor will then commence. The announcement of the Preferred Route is currently scheduled for later in 2009.

Road Safety

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to give the number of applications for safety measures for primary schools to provide flashing warning lights, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1021/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there is no specific application process for safety measures at primary schools to provide 4. However, the table below shows the expressions of interest for flashing warning lights at primary schools, in each of the last 3 years:

Year	Expressions of Interest
2005/06	56
2006/07	48
2007/08	37

Road Safety

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how much funding was available for safety measures for primary schools to provide flashing warning lights in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1022/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service erect flashing lights as part of its School Travel and Safety Project, and budgets for these projects are set and monitored under the general Traffic-Calming programme.

Expenditure on flashing lights is not recorded separately from other traffic calming measures. The table below shows the expenditure on Traffic Calming, in each of the last 3 years:

Year	Funding £m
2005/06	£3.12
2006/07	£2.55
2007/08	£3.06

Road Safety

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how long Greyabbey Primary School has been on the waiting list for flashing warning lights to improve road safety. (AQW 1023/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As you are probably aware, schools are assessed by Roads Service using specified criteria and are awarded a points score, which allows a priority listing to be drawn up for each Council area.

Greyabbey Primary School was assessed in May 2007. Pending the availability of resources, and subject to no other priorities being identified, it will be included on the 2009/10 Newtownards programme for safety measures at schools.

Safety Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how many (i) safety schemes have been completed for primary schools in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) have flashing warning lights included in the schemes. (AQW 1078/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Details of the number of safety schemes for primary schools and those which include flashing warning lights, completed by my Department's Roads Service in each of the last three financial years is provided in the table below.

Year	Total Number of Safety Schemes at Primary Schools	Number of Safety Schemes incorporating Flashing lights
2005/06	35	34
2006/07	34	34
2007/08	40	39

Roads Service Division	Northern	Southern	Eastern	Western	Total
Number of Street Lights	60,655	63,438	95,769	39,208	259,070
Street Lighting Maintenance Budget for 2008/2009	£1,318,000	£1,346,000	£2,083,000	£814,000	£5,561,000

Road Safety

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the schools in the Lagan Valley Constituency that have taken part in the Roads Service Safer Roads school initiatives, in the last academic year. (AQW 1131/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In the 2007/08 academic year, one school in the Lagan Valley Constituency, Assumption Grammar School, has taken part in the Travelwise Safer Routes to School Programme.

This current academic year, 2008/09, three schools in the Lagan Valley Constituency, Maghaberry Primary School, St Patrick's High School (Lisburn), and St Aloysius Primary School (Lisburn), are taking part.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development 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. (AQW 1151/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department does not keep records of carbon usage and has no plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken.

However, Translink maintains records of carbon usage for public transport services and Northern Ireland Water estimates the carbon equivalent emissions from the power used to provide drinkable water, to treat wastewater and from its offices and sites.

Street Lights

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many street lights there are; and (ii) how much is spent annually on maintenance, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1167/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not hold the information you requested by Parliamentary Constituency. The table below details the number of street lights, at September 2008, within each Roads Service Division and the budget allocated towards their maintenance in 2008/2009.

Parking Fines

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many parking fines were issued in each of the last 12 months, broken down by council area.
(AQW 1168/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices issued in each of the last twelve months, by District Council area, are set out in the tables below.

Financial Year 2007/08						
	Oct 2007	Nov 2007	Dec 2007	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008
Antrim	140	147	127	135	122	109
Ards	423	451	336	341	313	304
Armagh	484	532	403	347	321	204
Ballymena	447	423	540	356	327	316
Ballymoney	184	143	115	97	133	158
Banbridge	123	158	116	87	134	128
Belfast (inc Castlereagh)	4464	4274	3329	3404	4702	4500
Carrickfergus	247	222	213	195	170	140
Coleraine	576	431	456	368	470	556
Cookstown	219	252	212	218	187	178
Craigavon	627	370	424	352	334	344
Derry	2250	1747	1609	1207	1145	1018
Down	592	527	491	366	298	327
Dungannon	312	366	299	237	237	130
Fermanagh	1075	936	892	724	476	586
Larne	75	68	64	41	59	59
Limavady	237	163	115	140	126	107
Lisburn	486	470	665	429	463	553
Magherafelt	356	325	223	341	308	337
Moyle	26	26	9	15	12	12
Newry&Mourne	469	482	295	327	411	363
Newtownabbey	152	184	92	101	124	103
North Down	383	401	334	320	391	376
Omagh	459	576	444	433	408	422
Strabane	337	251	218	249	250	205
Total	15143	13925	12021	10830	11921	11535

Financial Year 2008/09						
	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08
Antrim	87	129	127	106	91	106
Ards	250	366	245	251	263	237
Armagh	270	230	246	260	227	254
Ballymena	345	365	386	378	392	293
Ballymoney	118	120	162	107	98	122

Financial Year 2008/09						
	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08
Banbridge	129	123	149	166	120	126
Belfast (inc Castlereagh)	4463	4283	3556	3356	3310	3896
Carrickfergus	109	111	164	99	228	188
Coleraine	480	464	498	717	638	536
Cookstown	237	244	183	141	175	188
Craigavon	471	475	365	381	395	324
Derry	1070	1079	1023	852	765	1007
Down	478	498	323	312	381	361
Dungannon	270	305	239	325	360	314
Fermanagh	658	774	744	623	692	663
Larne	101	56	59	64	39	22
Limavady	123	115	146	122	120	94
Lisburn	552	540	506	596	809	783
Magherafelt	378	317	249	277	287	234
Moyle	12	12	32	38	132	17
Newry&Mourne	387	380	391	321	375	650
Newtownabbey	128	119	117	75	96	115
North Down	317	416	466	404	465	541
Omagh	380	503	503	364	367	441
Strabane	217	269	204	169	200	172
Total	12030	12293	11083	10504	11025	11684

Dungiven Bypass

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on plans for the Dungiven by-pass. (AQW 1217/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member may recall from the Regional Development Committee meeting on 17 September 2008 that 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. However, 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. I can also advise that it is anticipated that the Bypass section of the scheme will take about eighteen months to complete.

Private Office Staff

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development how many staff are employed in his Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1339/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: A total of 8 staff are currently employed within my Private Office.

The costs of employing staff within this Office are as follows:

Period	Cost (£)
2007/08	162,542
1 April - 30 September 2008	89,948

Eastward Extension of Prince Andrew Way, Carrickfergus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons for the delay

in the adoption of the eastward extension of Prince Andrew Way, Carrickfergus, beyond Broadlands; and for a timescale for the opening of this section of road.
(AQW 1359/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service will issue a Preliminary Certificate of Completion to the developer upon request, when development roads are properly completed and are operating satisfactorily. At the end of a subsequent one year maintenance period, the developer can request adoption and, subject to a satisfactory performance during the maintenance period, Roads Service will formally complete the road adoption. From that point, responsibility for maintenance operations transfers to Roads Service.

The Spine Road, the eastward extension of Prince Andrew Way, has been constructed by the developer, but traffic is prevented from using it by barriers erected by the same developer, Antrim Construction. I understand that Antrim Construction has made an application to Roads Service for a Preliminary Certificate. Unfortunately, it is not possible to issue this certificate and begin the one year maintenance period until the road is operational and its performance, under normal traffic conditions, can be assessed. In addition, the road is not yet completed satisfactorily, as the necessary road markings have not been provided.

Roads Service has recently written to Antrim Construction to encourage early completion of the Spine Road, in the hope that the matter can be satisfactorily resolved and the road opened to traffic, without the need for enforcement action by Roads Service. If there has been no positive response received by the end of October 2008, Roads Service intends to begin enforcement proceedings to complete the works and adopt the road.

Glenhordial Storage Tanks

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development what proposals he has to upgrade access to the Glenhordial storage tanks in Omagh.
(AQW 1381/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it does not own the access road to the storage tanks at Glenhordial, but has a right of way to the service reservoir for inspection and maintenance purposes.

Northern Ireland Water has therefore no proposals to upgrade the access road, but would be willing to consider an arrangement whereby the cost of upgrading work and maintenance is shared by all users of the road.

Waste Water Network

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are being taken to address the deficiencies in Omagh town's waste water network.
(AQW 1382/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a Drainage Area Study is currently underway which will assess the adequacy of the sewerage system in Omagh and identify parts of the system that need to be upgraded. The Study is scheduled for completion in mid 2009. Any sewer improvement recommendations resulting from the Study will be prioritised by Northern Ireland Water and included in its capital works programme. However, due to competing priorities, it is unlikely that any improvements could commence before 2011.

In addition, Northern Ireland Water is proposing to undertake a £2.4 million project to reduce the risk of flooding in the Brookmount Road area of Omagh. The project, which will increase the capacity of the sewerage system in the area, is scheduled to commence during Spring 2009.

Running Water Supply

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development what are the total number of homes in the West Tyrone constituency, that do not have a running water supply; and what steps he proposes to take to address this problem.
(AQW 1389/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it estimates around 300 homes in the West Tyrone constituency are not connected to the public water supply.

Northern Ireland Water is required under Article 76 of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 to provide a requisitioned water main for domestic purposes subject to certain conditions. One of the conditions, set out in Article 77, requires the persons making the requisition to pay the reasonable costs of providing the water main as determined in accordance with Northern Ireland Water's charges scheme.

I recognise the needs of those households that are not currently served by the mains water network. Investigation of options aimed at increasing the affordability of the provision of mains water to existing households will be carried out as part of the response to the review of water and sewerage services. Currently, an allowance of £6,500 per existing property is provided. This is in excess of any additional support available in Britain.

Downgrading of the Old A1 Road

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline a timescale for the downgrading of the old A1 road. (AQW 1390/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: For the purpose of this response I have assumed that you are referring to the Dublin Road, which heads in a southerly direction from Newry. I can advise that the A1 designation for this route transferred to the new dual carriageway, when it was opened to traffic in August 2007. The section of the Dublin Road, heading south from Ellisholding Road, is now identified as the B113. The section of the Dublin Road, heading north, from Ellisholding Road to Brogies Road, is unclassified.

In due course, my Department's Roads Service will process Classification Orders to formalise these changes. However, in view of a range of similar changes associated with the construction of the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway, this process will not commence until the completion of this major improvement scheme, which I expect will be achieved towards the end of 2010.

Railway Access

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline how his Department will improve railway access to Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQW 1395/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently no plans at present to extend rail links to Belfast International Airport. The likely costs of providing a rail service to the airport were considered in 2006 when it was concluded that it would not be economically viable. It is estimated that passenger numbers at the airport would have to double from their current level for this position to change. The next Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland provides an opportunity to revisit these issues and to consider the viability of potential developments.

There are no immediate plans to commit resources to provide a rail halt at the George Best Belfast City Airport. However, the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) includes a longer-term proposal for a new railway station at Tillysburn. If this went ahead it could serve both the Holywood Exchange and George Best Belfast City Airport.

Additional Lanes on M1

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Regional Development when the additional lanes on the M1 at

Stockman's Lane intersection through to Broadway will be operational. (AQW 1457/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that due to ongoing works, to the motorway communications system and to link the slip roads to the mainline carriageway, the third lane of the M1 motorway and Westlink is expected to be open to traffic by the end of November 2008. However, after this date some lane closures will be required at off peak times to allow further outstanding road works to be completed.

Direct Rail Service

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Regional Development when a direct rail service will operate between Derry/Londonderry and Dublin. (AQO 633/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: 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 on the Enterprise services.

Footpaths in Rural Areas

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the provision of footpaths in rural areas; and what criteria is used in this process. (AQO 586/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has plans for the provision of 19 new footway schemes in rural areas throughout the North in 2008/09.

The assessment procedure, used by Roads Service for prioritising footway schemes, takes into account various criteria, such as personal injury collision statistics, consideration of traffic volume and speeds, the volume of pedestrians and type of pedestrian use, that is, walking to/from work, school, shop etc, or for leisure/recreational walking. Other factors that are considered include the effect on the environment, value for money and also whether the scheme provides improved accessibility and integration through, provision of a footway missing link, extension of an existing footway, provisions for cyclists and improved access to public transport.

Rise in Fuel Prices

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact the rise in fuel prices will have on public transport. (AQO 653/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Fuel prices have risen sharply over the last year and may increase further. The success in growing bus and rail passenger numbers in recent years means that an element of increased fuel costs can be absorbed by Translink internally. However, inevitably Translink have had to pass some of the fuel price increases on to the customer, and fares have gone up as a result. A 5% fare increase was introduced in August 2008 to cover increased fuel costs to the end of March 2009. It is estimated that fuel costs will have increased by 24% over that period.

The increase in fuel costs experienced by the private motorist may also have an impact on public transport by increasing its attractiveness as an alternative mode of travel.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what the projected saving will be as a result of the 200 job cuts in Northern Ireland Water. (AQO 584/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water 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 be around 200. Every effort will be made to achieve the reductions by voluntary means.

The projected savings resulting from the 304 reduction in funded budgetary posts is in the region of £12.16 million per annum, based on average total salary costs which include pension and employers national insurance.

Hybrid Buses

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his discussions, plans and timescale for the introduction of hybrid buses in Belfast and other centres of high population. (AQO 630/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department is currently considering proposals submitted by Translink to purchase seven Hybrid or Environmentally Enhanced Vehicles (EEVs) on a trial basis. If the proposals are approved, it is envisaged that two would be used on the Giant's Causeway to Coleraine service with the remaining five deployed in Belfast on the Royal Victoria Hospital link service and at Park & Ride facilities in the North and East of

the city. Depending on their success, funding for more such vehicles may be considered as part of Translink's bus replacement programme.

Translink

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans Translink has to extend late night weekend bus services from Belfast to regional towns. (AQO 650/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Translink that they have no plans to extend late night weekend bus services from Belfast to regional towns. They continue however to keep all operations under review.

Rail/Bus Station and Park and Ride Facility

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development when the first phase of the proposed rail/bus station and park and ride facility at Ballymartin, Templepatrick, is due to open. (AQO 609/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The first phase of the proposed Ballymartin Bus and Rail Park and Ride facility, which is bus based, has an indicative opening date of 2012. This phase will provide between 150 and 200 spaces.

Clearing Bonfire Sites

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been spent by his Department in clearing bonfire sites and repairing road surfaces over the last 3 years in the Armagh City and District Council area. (AQO 649/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has incurred no costs in clearing bonfire sites or repairing road surfaces damaged by bonfires, in the Armagh City and District Council area, during the last 3 years.

Bypass at Moira Village

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department is examining the viability of a by-pass at Moira village; and for an update on progress made. (AQO 627/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, as part of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015, the road network around Moira was included in an assessment for major improvements to the strategic road network

of the Greater Belfast area. This assessment did not identify a need for a bypass at Moira village.

Roads Service is currently conducting a Traffic Management Study of the main junctions in Moira and a Route Management Study for the A26 route from the M1 Moira Roundabout to the Nutts Corner Roundabout. Any proposed road improvement in Moira, or to the A26, will have to compete for priority with other schemes and will be subject to satisfactory completion of the statutory procedures and the level of funding available at the time.

Waterside Railway Station

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money was spent on the refurbishment of the Waterside Railway Station in the last 3 years; and the amount of spending planned for the next 3 years. (AQO 645/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There has been no refurbishment work carried out at Waterside Station during the last three years. However maintenance work at the station is ongoing at an average cost of £8,000 per annum. As part of a project to upgrade stations and halts to comply with Disability Discrimination legislation and Translink's New Rail Vision, work costing £290,000 will be completed later this year to provide the station with tactile paving, improved lighting and signage, improved toilets and general painting.

In the longer term options for the future of the station at Derry will be considered as part of the planning process for the relay of the railway line between Derry and Coleraine.

Current Economic Slowdown

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to support the economy in light of the current economic slowdown. (AQO 679/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department will continue to play an instrumental role in supporting the economy through these difficult times by investment in our roads and water infrastructure and in public transport services, ports and airports.

The Executive's Investment Strategy sets out the framework that will create a sustainable 21st century infrastructure in the North, and has indicated an investment of £3.1 billion in roads infrastructure. Of this, I have allocated around £2.5 billion to the Strategic Road Network, which has a direct impact on the competitiveness of business and ultimately therefore

on the competitiveness of the North. Businesses depend on the accessibility of labour and on being able to get their goods to wherever they are needed - reliably and on time. Investment is therefore essential in improving productivity and underpinning a successful economy.

We are also investing £1.0m a day to improve our water and sewerage infrastructure.

Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water are progressing major PPP programmes and are major employers in their own right.

The impact of this extensive investment not only supports local contractors directly carrying out the work, but also the wider construction industry and suppliers of goods and services. This investment in the North's infrastructure will pay dividends for the economy, both sides of the border, as it acts as a catalyst for regional development.

The Department plans to provide subsidies, amounting to £95.0m in the next three years, to Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) and bus operators to help to ensure affordable public transport services at a time of escalating costs for private transport. In the same period, around £88.0m will be provided for the Concessionary Fares Scheme, which includes the new free travel scheme for 60 to 64 year olds, and in the region of £7.5m per year will be spent on Door-to-Door Transport and the Rural Transport Fund.

On the capital side, investment of over £180.0m is planned, in the same period, to enable further procurement of new trains, continuation of the bus replacement programme and upgrades to improve the Belfast to Derry line and the Belfast to Dublin line.

The planned expenditure will ensure an effective and affordable public transport network, which is key to a healthy economy. It will also maintain jobs within the transport, community, construction and other sectors.

The City of Derry Airport is an important asset for economic development and tourism in the North West of Ireland. My Department, jointly with the Irish Government, is grant aiding safety improvements there. Longer term plans are in place to improve road access to the key regional gateway at Belfast International Airport and to support better public transport access to Belfast City Airport.

We are providing grant aid of approximately £15.0m for provision of enhanced deep water and roll-on / roll-off facilities at Warrenpoint Port. When completed, mid-2009, these new facilities will help to secure the long-term future of Warrenpoint Port as a major transportation gateway and economic generator for the regional economy.

As an outcome of the Ports Policy Review, I have signalled my intention to provide the trust ports with

greater commercial powers. These powers will enable the ports to compete more effectively and flexibly for trade. They will also enable the ports to supplement their revenue streams through more innovative income-generating activities. This will benefit all the Ports and the economy as a whole.

Overall, the substantial investment planned by my Department, across a wide range of programmes, will help to support the economy in light of the current economic slowdown.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Money Returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what money her Department returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel in March 2008. (AQW 890/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): Following a number of adjustments during the normal in-year monitoring rounds (the last in February 2008), the Department's overall final budget allocation for 2007-08 was £690 million and £692 million was spent. The nett overspend arose in the capital element of the budget where, due to difficulties with various multi-million pound purchases and disposals, £213 million was spent against an allocation of £202 million. On the resource side, the Department registered a £9m underspend, ie. -1.8% against the 2% variance target set. Overall, this meant that no money was returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel in March 2008, with the £2m overspend representing +0.3% on the Department's final allocation.

Department Projects

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the successful projects her Department has completed in the last 12 months in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 963/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In relation to housing, my Department has completed 8 social housing schemes and 10 improvement schemes. Under town centre regeneration, projects completed since 1 October 2007 by the Department include a public realm scheme in Dromore town centre and the Dromore Town Centre Marketing Plan. Under neighbourhood renewal, 3 projects with a value of £75,000 have been completed in the Lagmore estate,

which is part of the Colin Neighbourhood Renewal Area. As part of its support for the voluntary and community sectors, the Department has provided a substantial grant to Lisburn City Council under the Community Support Programme and supported 13 projects in the constituency, including the Atlas Women's Centre, the Local Community Fund projects in Hilhall and Old Warren and 10 small projects under the Community Volunteering Scheme.

Town Centre Regeneration in Lagan Valley

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development what money her Department has spent on town centre regeneration in Lagan Valley in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 964/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As the Department for Social Development came into existence in December 1999, figures are only available for the 1999/2000 financial year onwards. The amount of money spent by my Department on town centre regeneration in the Lagan Valley constituency in each year since 1999/2000 is as follows.

1999/2000	0
2000/2001	0
2001/2002	0
2002/2003	0
2003/2004	0
2004/2005	£34,869.50
2005/2006	£8,390.00
2006/2007	£205,097.75
2007/2008	£174,365.00

Department Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development how many page views her Department's website received each month, for the last 12 months. (AQW 1075/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The following table details the number of page views that the Departmental site www.dsdni.gov.uk received each month for the last 12 months.

Month	Page views
October 2007	244,971
November 2007	209,635
December 2007	145,122

Month	Page views
January 2008	227,538
February 2008	202,462
March 2008	210,309
April 2008	228,933
May 2008	211,759
June 2008	234,911
July 2008	193,152
August 2008	210,935
September 2008	249,076

Supporting People Revenue Fund

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development why the supporting people revenue fund is static for the next 3 years, in light of the fact that residents discharged from Muckamore Abbey are waiting to be re-housed. (AQW 1081/09)

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. My aim is to deliver 5,250 new social homes over this three year period and I have plans in place to ensure this will happen.

Midnight Soccer Initiatives

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what support is available from her Department for midnight soccer initiatives. (AQW 1095/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Midnight soccer programmes can be supported by the Neighbourhood Renewal programme if these are proposed in an action plan through a Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership as a programme to encourage community renewal and tackle anti-social behavior. In addition the Local Community Fund, which operates in the 11%-20% most deprived communities as defined by the Noble Index of Deprivation 2005 of Northern Ireland, can support such initiatives subject to their application being approved by the Intermediary Funding Body and the Department.

Benefit Uptake Programme

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the success of the Benefit Uptake Programme launched in May 2008, particularly in relation to Pension Credit. (AQW 1102/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Benefit Uptake Programme will run until February 2009 and final results from the 6 exercises will not be known until the Programme is evaluated in June 2009. At the end of September, over 90,000 clients had been contacted. Results at this early stage for the client focused mailshot on State Pension Credit show 689 claims have been successful. The average award is £46.39 per week, which is equivalent to £1.66 million per year in extra benefit.

Shelters for Homeless People

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to provide shelter to homeless people particularly as winter approaches. (AQW 1104/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has a wide range of temporary and emergency accommodation at its disposal across Northern Ireland. In addition to 22 directly managed hostels and 69 managed by voluntary sector organisations, the Housing Executive also has access to 593 units of accommodation in the private rented sector.

With regard to other emergency services, the Housing Executive funds an all day Street Outreach service in Belfast which offers assistance to 'rough sleepers'

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the funding allocated to the Warm Homes Scheme for the 2008-09 financial year, given the rise in the cost of living; and what action she is taking to protect the vulnerable in society. (AQW 1109/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have increased my Department's Warm Homes Scheme budget to £20 million this year and I have, and will continue to, bid for additional resources through the in-year monitoring process. Fuel poverty is a cross departmental issue. I had anticipated the current 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 which could be developed to assist those in need this winter. I have brought a paper on Tackling Fuel Poverty to the Executive seeking their endorsement of a number of recommendations emanating from the Task Force. In light of the Executive not meeting, I was forced to bring forward my Fuel Poverty Recommendations under Urgent Procedure.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently claiming (i) higher rate; (ii) middle rate; and (iii) lower rate, Disability Living Allowance; and how much has been paid out in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1112/09)

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 tables below set out the breakdown of recipients as requested and the expenditure in each of the last three financial years.

TABLE (I) HIGHER RATE

DLA Recipients by component	Numbers
Higher rate care only	2,258
Higher rate care and higher rate mobility	31,118
Higher rate care and lower rate mobility	14,566
Higher rate mobility only	9,364
Higher rate mobility and middle rate care	36,912
Higher rate mobility and lower rate care	15,478
Total	109,696

TABLE (II) MIDDLE RATE

DLA Recipients by component	Numbers
Middle rate care only	10,249
Middle rate care and lower rate mobility	36,119
Total	46,368

TABLE (III) LOWER RATE

DLA Recipients by component	Numbers
Lower rate care only	11,352
Lower rate mobility only	3,076
Lower rate care and lower rate mobility	3,875
Total	18,303

TABLE (IV) DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE PAID IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE FINANCIAL YEARS

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Total amount of financial expenditure (in millions)	£582.6m	£610.7m	£646.1m

Housing Executive

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how the Private Sector Improvement Service will impact on the provision of Housing Executive grants. (AQW 1117/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these two questions are linked I will answer them together.

The Housing Executive's planned review of the Private Sector Improvement Service was postponed because the Service had been earmarked for transfer to local District Councils under the Review of Public Administration proposals. However, following consultation, it was decided that responsibility for the grants element of the Private Sector Improvement Service will remain with the Housing Executive, but that the registration of Houses in Multiple Occupation element should be transferred. Now that this has been clarified, the Housing Executive will review the grants service with the aim of identifying potential efficiencies. With the exception of a planned merger of the two Belfast grants offices later this year, no actions are intended until late 2009. It is too early to estimate the number of posts that could potentially be affected by this review.

Housing Executive

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive posts will be effected by the efficiency savings under the Private Sector Improvement Service. (AQW 1118/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these two questions are linked I will answer them together.

The Housing Executive's planned review of the Private Sector Improvement Service was postponed because the Service had been earmarked for transfer to local District Councils under the Review of Public Administration proposals. However, following consultation, it was decided that responsibility for the grants element of the Private Sector Improvement Service will remain with the Housing Executive, but that the registration of Houses in Multiple Occupation element should be transferred. Now that this has been clarified, the Housing Executive will review the grants service with the aim of identifying potential efficiencies. With the exception of a planned merger

of the two Belfast grants offices later this year, no actions are intended until late 2009. It is too early to estimate the number of posts that could potentially be affected by this review.

Pension Credit

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how many people (i) claim; and (ii) are entitled to claim, pension credit; how much money (a) has been claimed; and (b) remained unclaimed, in each of the last 3 years; and what happens to the money that remains unclaimed. (AQW 1119/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is provided in the tables below. Those detailing the number and value of potential non recipients are based on estimates from the Northern Ireland Income-Related report where results have been aggregated over a two year period 2004-2006. The most up to date information shows that since 2003, the number of households that receive pension credit has increased by more than 17,000.

In relation to unclaimed money the Department only draws down sufficient cash resources from Treasury Central Funds to cover its actual benefit expenditure each financial year.

NUMBER OF STATE PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANTS, PARTNERS AND BENEFICIARIES

(I)

Number of Claimants	Number of Partners	Number of Beneficiaries
95,800	21,560	117,360

(II)

Estimated Potential Entitled Non recipients 2004-06
* 17,000 - 86,000

* Due to sampling constraints, results are presented as a range of values.

(III) ANNUAL STATE PENSION CREDIT EXPENDITURE

2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
£284m	£300m	£315m

(IV)

Estimated of Unclaimed State Pension Credit 2004-06
* 26m – 168m

Jobs and Benefits Offices

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently employed as front line staff in Jobs and Benefits Offices in (i) Newry; and (ii) Northern Ireland; and what proportion of these staff have been employed for over 10 years. (AQW 1120/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A total of 73 Social Security Agency staff are employed in Newry Jobs & Benefits Office. These staff are involved in processing claims to Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Social Fund; a number of staff are also employed in the customer enquiry team. Personnel information relating to all staff across the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments is recorded on the Human Resource Management System (HRMS). The HRMS enquiry facility is only able to identify staff in their most recent work location and the earliest date from which information is readily available is 1 July 1999. From this, I can advise that 39 staff, approximately 53%, have been working in Newry Jobs & Benefits Office in excess of 9 years.

The Agency has provided details for staff employed in both Jobs & Benefit Offices and the remaining 10 Social Security Offices. At 6 October 2008, a total of 1924 staff were employed across the Agency's network of 35 Jobs & Benefits/Social Security Offices and of these, 689 approximately 36% have been working in the same location in excess of 9 years.

Town Centre Regeneration

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how much her Department has spent on town centre regeneration in the Mid-Ulster constituency in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 1124/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has spent £62,930.37 on Cookstown Town Centre Promotion and Marketing. The money was allocated to Cookstown District Council and they spent £24,829 in year 05/06, £16,845.63 in year 06/07 and £21,255.74 in year 07/08. In addition my Department has allocated finance towards a Public Realm scheme in Burn Road Cookstown which will also be carried out through Cookstown District Council. To date £12,500 of the allocated budget has been spent.

Department Projects

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the successful projects her

Department has completed in the last 12 months in the Mid-Ulster constituency. (AQW 1125/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has completed a range of successful projects over the last 12 months in both housing and the voluntary and community sector. The Voluntary and Community Unit funded 19 Local Community Fund projects, 12 Community Volunteering Scheme projects and one Children and Young People Fund package throughout Mid-Ulster at a total cost of £229,776. Three Social Housing Schemes were completed, one each in Magherafelt, Maghera and Cookstown. In addition 16 Housing Improvement Schemes were completed across the Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon areas.

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development 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 1144/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Two meetings were held with Professor Bain in relation to the review of the location of public-sector jobs.

No specific offers to relocate jobs were made but a number of initiatives are under consideration

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development for the number of successful applications for the Warm Homes Scheme, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1178/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information below sets out the number of completed heating installations and number of households receiving insulation measures during 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08. Please note that these statistics reflect the

number of heating and insulation installations completed. Some households received both measures so the total figure does not represent actual number of households.

	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Heating	Insulation	Heating	Insulation	Heating	Insulation
Belfast East	95	361	70	321	147	306
Belfast North	168	524	146	567	241	477
Belfast South	64	270	36	194	97	256
Belfast West	203	624	158	485	245	445
East Antrim	114	259	80	401	111	295
East Londonderry	123	303	140	418	134	431
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	256	434	333	476	306	573
Foyle	157	598	312	467	147	449
Lagan Valley	103	297	131	413	145	413
Mid Ulster	274	623	411	557	294	572
Newry & Armagh	252	750	431	876	305	600
North Antrim	162	377	166	339	126	498
North Down	126	406	52	315	166	330
South Antrim	160	380	181	611	179	467
South Down	223	576	275	699	325	651
Strangford	85	270	97	374	170	421
Upper Bann	184	422	388	663	342	773
West Tyrone	164	450	269	634	429	675

Department Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the successful projects her Department has completed in the last 12 months, in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1184/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department is engaged in a wide range of projects in North Down some of which have completed in the last 12 months. Of those that completed there were 9 new social housing schemes and a further 9 improvement schemes in Bangor and Holywood. In relation to urban regeneration a programme of environmental improvement schemes and the refurbishment of a community facility were completed in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor. Community grants were also awarded to 10 groups operating in the North Down area through the Community Volunteering Scheme, and the Local Community Fund targeted projects in the Rathgill and Harbour areas.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of all groups that were categorised as groups 1 and 2 in (i) Belfast; and (ii) the rest of Northern Ireland, in relation to the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. (AQW 1187/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As the questions are interlinked I will answer the three together. Copies of the tables have been placed in the Assembly library. Table 1 refers to AQW 1187/09 and Table 2 refers to AQW 1188/09.

In response to AQW 1189/09, my Department will issue letters of offer, where appropriate, as soon as possible following completion of the appraisal process.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the letters of offer that were issued to organisations categorised as groups 1 and 2 in the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, broken down by neighbourhood renewal area. (AQW 1188/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As the questions are interlinked I will answer the three together. Copies of the tables have been placed in the Assembly library. Table 1 refers to AQW 1187/09 and Table 2 refers to AQW 1188/09.

In response to AQW 1189/09, my Department will issue letters of offer, where appropriate, as soon as possible following completion of the appraisal process.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development for the timescale in which all organisations categorised as groups 1 and 2 in the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme will be given letters offering funding. (AQW 1189/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As the questions are interlinked I will answer the three together. Copies of the tables have been placed in the Assembly library. Table 1 refers to AQW 1187/09 and Table 2 refers to AQW 1188/09.

In response to AQW 1189/09, my Department will issue letters of offer, where appropriate, as soon as possible following completion of the appraisal process.

Executive Meetings

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what areas of her Department's business are being held up by the Executive's failure to meet. (AQW 1199/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Executive's failure to meet is impacting my Department's business in relation to housing issues and gambling legislation. If the Executive does not meet in the near future my Department's business in respect of social security related matters and liquor licensing may also be impacted.

Multi Element Improvement Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the external cyclical maintenance and multi element improvement scheme for the Victoria Gardens Housing Estate in Donaghadee, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1200/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Details of the schemes included within the Housing Executive's planned improvement programme over the next three years for Victoria Gardens are as follows:-

- External Cyclical Maintenance to 50 dwellings in Victoria Court, Victoria Crescent and Victoria Gardens at a cost of £74k, programmed for 2011/12.
- Multi-element improvement works to 10 dwellings in Victoria Court, Victoria Crescent and Victoria Gardens at a cost of £536k, programmed for 2010/11.

Multi Element Improvement Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the external cyclical maintenance and

multi element improvement scheme for the Ashfield Housing Estate in Donaghadee, over the next 3 years.
(AQW 1201/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Details of the schemes included within the Housing Executive's planned improvement programme over the next three years for Ashfield are as follows:-

- External Cyclical Maintenance works to 77 dwellings in Ashfield Court and Ashfield Drive at a cost of £109k, programmed for 2009/10.

Traveller Site at Legahory, Craigavon

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the proposal to extend the approval of the traveller site at Legahory, Craigavon.
(AQW 1216/09)

The Minister for Social Development: An emergency halting site for Travellers is currently situated at Legahory Green, Craigavon. Planning permission for development of the site was originally granted for a period of two years expiring in February 2009.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which has strategic responsibility for Traveller accommodation, has submitted a further planning application to extend the use of this emergency halting site for a further three years until February 2012. This application includes provision of electricity, shower and toilet facilities to improve living conditions on the site and to comply with licensing conditions imposed by Craigavon Borough Council. This will allow time to identify and develop other necessary sites in the Craigavon area.

Increase in Energy Prices

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, given the increase in energy prices, what action she is taking to help senior citizens and the infirm to protect themselves against hypothermia.
(AQW 1220/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I had anticipated the current fuel poverty crisis and in May 2008 I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force. The Task Force has completed its findings and I have circulated a paper to Ministerial colleagues seeking their endorsement of a comprehensive set of proposals. As the Executive has failed to meet recently I have now sought permission to take the recommendations forward under urgent procedure.

In May 2008 I launched the Social Security Agency's Benefit Uptake campaign to increase awareness of social security benefits. In this year's programme

115,000 people across Northern Ireland will be contacted to make sure they are not missing out on benefits, around 108,000 will be older people. The Agency has also commenced an advertising campaign to increase awareness of the Winter Fuel Payment scheme for newly eligible customers.

In addition, applicants over 60 years of age and in receipt of a qualifying benefit may be eligible for assistance under the Warm Homes Scheme, which provides financial support to improve the energy efficiency of homes through a range of insulation and heating measures.

Housing Benefits

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of the amount of housing benefits paid to private landlords in the (i) BT11; (ii) BT12; and (iii) BT13, post code areas of West Belfast.
(AQW 1240/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together. The Housing Executive does not collate Housing Benefit information by post code area. The Table below details the Housing Benefit expenditure within the Housing Executive administrative areas for the financial year 2007/08.

These figures include payments to private landlords, Housing Associations and rates only claimants. The figures cannot be broken down for private landlords only.

NIHE administrative area	Housing Benefit expenditure
Belfast West	£16,968,750
Belfast South	£18,772,816
Belfast North	£12,861,439

Housing Benefits

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of the amount of housing benefits paid to private landlords in the BT7 post code area of South Belfast.
(AQW 1241/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together. The Housing Executive does not collate Housing Benefit information by post code area. The Table below details the Housing Benefit expenditure within the Housing Executive administrative areas for the financial year 2007/08.

These figures include payments to private landlords, Housing Associations and rates only claimants. The figures cannot be broken down for private landlords only.

NIHE administrative area	Housing Benefit expenditure
Belfast West	£16,968,750
Belfast South	£18,772,816
Belfast North	£12,861,439

Housing Benefits

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of the amount of housing benefits paid to private landlords in the BT14; and BT15, post code areas of North Belfast.

(AQW 1242/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together. The Housing Executive does not collate Housing Benefit information by post code area. The Table below details the Housing Benefit expenditure within the Housing Executive administrative areas for the financial year 2007/08.

These figures include payments to private landlords, Housing Associations and rates only claimants. The figures cannot be broken down for private landlords only.

NIHE administrative area	Housing Benefit expenditure
Belfast West	£16,968,750
Belfast South	£18,772,816
Belfast North	£12,861,439

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of neighbourhood renewal projects that have had their funding withheld; (ii) where these projects are situated; and (iii) the potential number of job losses as a result of funding being withheld.

(AQW 1243/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Neighbourhood Renewal funding is not being withheld but all Neighbourhood Renewal projects are subject to an appraisal process. Given the pressure on funds across the Department, I want to be sure that best use is being made of available resources. I have therefore asked for the funding requirements of current Neighbourhood Renewal projects to be examined in the context of budgetary resources.

Watchman Devices

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development if she will consider the installation of watchman devices in Housing Executive properties. (AQW 1265/09)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an operational matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Watchman devices are now fitted in all new oil heating installations within Housing Executive dwellings. The Housing Executive however does not consider that it would be practical, or cost effective, to install these devices where oil heating is already in place.

Clearance of Bonfires

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development how much the Housing Executive has spent on the clearance of bonfires on its sites, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 1266/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The costs incurred by the Housing Executive through the removal and reinstatement works associated with bonfires for the period 2005/2008 are:-

2005	£157,000
2006	£147,000
2007	£167,000
2008	£125,000

The figures prior to 2005 are not available as these costs were previously included within the Housing Executive's response maintenance budget.

Criteria for High Rate Mobility

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will consider making representations to change the criteria for high rate mobility to include those with (i) blindness; (ii) Downs Syndrome; and (iii) Prader-Willi Syndrome.

(AQW 1281/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The higher rate mobility component of disability living allowance is for people who are physically unable, or virtually unable, to walk. It is also available to people who are both deaf and blind and require the assistance of another person to walk to any intended or required destination when out of doors because this combination of circumstances means that they are virtually unable to walk. People with blindness, Down's Syndrome or Prader-Willi Syndrome who are not physically unable, or virtually unable, to walk can qualify for the lower rate of the mobility component

if they require guidance or supervision from another person when walking out of doors on unfamiliar routes.

Whilst automatic entitlement to disability living allowance for certain conditions may appear attractive, the concern is that it is not a precise enough way to determine someone's actual needs, how those needs may vary over time, or the variable responses of an individual to the condition. I do, however, propose to explore this issue with Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions.

Central Procurement Directorate/ Equality Commission

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how she intends to implement the Central Procurement Directorate/Equality Commission guidelines as part of her Department's Procurement Strategy for the Social Housing Development Programme. (AQW 1286/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The recently launched Procurement Strategy for the Social Housing Development Programme will mainstream equality considerations and good practice into the procurement of all social housing. The delivery of this strategy will require full compliance with wider Government procurement objectives including the recently launched "Guidance on equality of opportunity and sustainable development in public-sector procurement"

Social Security Regulations

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to comment on the potential impact of

the proposed Social Security Regulations amendments on vulnerable sections of society; and what action she is taking to challenge these proposals. (AQW 1287/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The regulations reduce the period for backdating Pension Credit and Housing Benefit for pensioners from 12 months to 3 months.

Evidence indicates that those claiming the Guarantee Credit element of Pension Credit- the poorest pensioners – are more likely to claim within 3 months of becoming entitled. In 2006/2007 an estimated 97% of all successful Guarantee Credit backdated claims were backdated for 3 months or less.

The proposed regulations were approved by the Executive on 2 October 2008. The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments No.3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 were made on 3 October 2008 and came into operation on 6 October 2008.

Complex Needs Status

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been awarded complex needs status each year since 2001, broken down by District Housing Office. (AQW 1301/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Table 1 below details the number of applicants who were awarded Complex Needs points and are considered for general needs housing each year since 2001 by NIHE District.

Table 2 contains details of complex needs applicants who require supported housing, and so are considered without reference to points, and separate from the general needs waiting list. Details for this group are only available from 2002/03.

TABLE 1

	2007-08	2006-07	2005-06	2004-05	2003-04	2002-03	2001-02	2000-01
Belfast 1	13	24	17	22	14	4	4	2
Belfast 2	21	28	14	25	18	12	7	3
Belfast 3	13	17	15	10	7	4	2	0
Belfast 7	38	54	51	30	19	15	8	8
Belfast 4	5	13	11	18	1	5	1	0
Belfast 5	7	9	6	4	2	4	0	1
Belfast 6	13	17	28	31	18	7	2	1
Bangor	20	36	39	12	12	10	6	2
Newtownards	23	29	18	22	15	6	3	0
Castlereagh	14	18	18	12	5	4	1	2
Lisburn	24	35	33	35	20	9	5	0

	2007-08	2006-07	2005-06	2004-05	2003-04	2002-03	2001-02	2000-1
Poleglass	5	7	12	10	3	2	0	0
Downpatrick	19	25	14	25	8	0	3	2
Banbridge	23	27	45	17	7	2	1	3
Newry	33	31	33	21	12	12	2	3
Armagh	20	21	39	14	3	2	2	1
Lurgan	23	33	32	17	10	10	2	2
Portadown	19	13	24	22	2	2	1	0
Dungannon	13	23	17	13	7	2	2	1
Fermanagh	57	61	66	50	23	9	4	4
Ballymena	26	25	24	15	14	3	4	1
Antrim	15	18	17	5	4	0	0	1
N'Abbey 1	13	11	12	13	7	3	4	1
N'Abbey 2	10	18	12	11	3	7	0	2
Carrickfergus	3	6	7	5	3	1	1	0
Larne	6	8	4	1	2	0	0	0
Ballycastle	7	6	2	2	0	1	0	0
Ballymoney	2	7	10	8	4	0	1	0
Coleraine	26	51	32	36	11	9	3	6
Derry 1	11	31	18	11	13	1	3	0
Derry 2	13	11	13	7	5	2		0
Derry 3	10	16	19	8	4	1	1	0
Limavady	1	11	1	1	1	2	0	2
Magherafelt	13	10	4	5	5	0	0	0
Strabane	9	14	5	5	8	5	1	4
Omagh	22	10	7	7	5	0	0	0
Cookstown	13	6	8	4	1	0	0	0
Total	603	780	727	554	296	156	74	52

TABLE 2

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Belfast 1	14	12	3	2	0	0
Belfast 2	17	15	10	15	9	8
Belfast 3	6	2	3	0	3	0
Belfast 4	0	1	2	2	2	2
Belfast 5	2	0	1	0	0	2
Belfast 6	8	5	4	0	1	0
Belfast 7	4	24	10	3	17	13
Antrim	22	13	19	11	11	9
Ballycastle	1	3	1	1	3	4
Ballymena	1	5	8	4	8	13

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Ballymoney	1	6	2	9	8	6
Carrickfergus	3	2	5	1	9	6
Coleraine	16	18	49	23	41	48
Larne	3	0	1	0	1	0
Newtownabbey 1	2	3	1	0	1	4
Newtownabbey 2	0	3	0	0	1	5
Armagh	4	22	6	19	14	2
Banbridge	4	4	8	2	19	12
Dungannon	0	0	0	2	2	0
Fermanagh	0	0	18	0	4	4
Lurgan	18	11	1	3	5	9
Newry	0	1	6	3	0	15
Portadown	0	0	1	0	3	3
Bangor	20	27	3	14	3	12
Castlereagh	19	4	0	10	7	8
Downpatrick	5	6	3	2	4	2
Lisburn	5	6	7	4	12	13
Dairy Farm	1	0	0	0	0	0
Newtownards	4	12	3	1	1	0
Cookstown	3	4	1	0	0	4
Limavady	10	1	3	9	2	5
Waterloo Place	9	12	5	5	7	3
Waterside	36	25	15	18	10	7
Collon Tce	8	10	6	3	9	6
Magherafelt	2	3	1	0	1	3
Omagh	14	15	16	28	31	21
Strabane	11	8	6	6	9	9
Total	273	283	228	200	258	258

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number; and (ii) percentage of Housing Executive stock in the North Down constituency, that hold energy performance certificates. (AQW 1317/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Energy Performance Certificates became necessary for all houses for sale from 1 July 2008. Since that date the Housing Executive has not sold any properties within the North Down Constituency area.

Housing Benefits

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties are currently occupied by people who are not in receipt of Housing Benefit. (AQW 1337/09)

The Minister for Social Development: At 1st August 2008 there were 19,005 Housing Executive tenants not in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Housing Executive Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she is planning to increase the amount

of money available for Housing Executive grants in the (i) Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) Strangford constituency. (AQW 1372/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Private Sector grant budget for the 2008/09 financial year is £40m. I will continue to make bids for additional funding in future monitoring rounds.

Responsibility for the allocation of the Private Sector grant rests with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Improvement Schemes

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development if she can confirm that the scheme to be implemented at Ard Carn in Newry, will be on schedule. (AQW 1391/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together.

There are currently two improvement schemes approved for Ardcarne Park, Newry. The kitchen replacement scheme and the environmental improvement scheme are planned for 2009. These schemes may be delayed as a result of financial pressures on the Housing Executive's capital budget.

Similarly, there are five additional improvement and maintenance schemes planned for the Newry and Mourne District Council area, but these are also subject to the Housing Executive's budget prioritisation.

Improvement Schemes

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development if she can (i) confirm that the Housing Executive has adequate funding to implement the environmental improvement scheme at Ard Carn in Newry; and (ii) ensure that adequate funding will be provided for other similar schemes, in the Newry and Mourne District Council area. (AQW 1392/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As these questions are linked I will answer them together.

There are currently two improvement schemes approved for Ardcarne Park, Newry. The kitchen replacement scheme and the environmental improvement scheme are planned for 2009. These schemes may be delayed as a result of financial pressures on the Housing Executive's capital budget.

Similarly, there are five additional improvement and maintenance schemes planned for the Newry and Mourne District Council area, but these are also subject to the Housing Executive's budget prioritisation.

Community Centre in Dunclug

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department will provide funding to refurbish the Community Centre in Dunclug, Ballymena. (AQW 1476/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My staff in Regional Development Office have received an application for funding from Ballymena Borough Council to enable the refurbishment of Dunclug Community Centre. This application is currently being appraised.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Postal Service

Mr W Clarke asked the Assembly Commission why the pre-paid Assembly postal service is limited to the United Kingdom only; and how this compares with procedures in (i) the Houses of the Oireachtas; (ii) the Scottish Parliament; (iii) the Welsh Assembly; and (iv) Westminster. (AQW 1302/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): The Northern Ireland Assembly use the Royal Mail as its postal service provider. The Royal Mail provides the Assembly with pre-paid envelopes for use within the United Kingdom only. They do not issue pre-paid envelopes for use outside of the United Kingdom.

The Royal Mail also provides the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and Westminster with pre-paid envelopes for use within the United Kingdom only.

The House of the Oireachtas provide each member with 2,000 pre-paid envelopes per month. The pre-paid envelopes can be used within the Republic of Ireland and/or further a field.

The Assembly Stationery Office will arrange for all post from MLAs destined for the Republic of Ireland and further a field to be franked at the appropriate rate at no cost to MLAs.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 24 October 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Emerald Fund

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that borrowing from the Emerald Fund will result in a reduction in the capital funding that the Executive receives from the Treasury, to detail (i) the Departments that have accessed finance from the Emerald Fund; (ii) the programmes the money has been used to fund; and (iii) the reduction in the Departmental budgets that occurred as a result of this. (AQW 1355/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): We would refer the Member to our answer to previous written questions on the Emerald Fund – AQW 8907/08, 8908/08 and 8909/08.

To date no Department has accessed finance from the Emerald Fund.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the annual cost to maintain its Departmental website. (AQW 1387/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The OFMDFM website is managed by an Information Officer as one element of their overall responsibilities. Content managers/authors within each directorate/branch maintain its own pages on the website. Only

a small percentage of their time is dedicated to this activity and it is not possible to identify the staff costs involved in this specific role.

As with other NICS websites, the OFMDFM site is hosted by Delivery and Innovation Division (DID), Department of Finance and Personnel and costs are not available for individual departmental websites. However, an estimate notional cost for development work on the OFMDFM site carried out by DID during the 2007/08 financial year is £1,000.

In addition, it costs the department £43.47 to renew the domain name for the departmental website www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk for two years.

Papers Cleared by Urgent Procedure

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail each paper cleared by urgent procedure; and the cost set aside by each Department for these initiatives. (AQW 1526/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A number of papers have been dealt with under the Urgent Procedure set out in paragraph 2.14 of the Ministerial Code, as listed in the table below.

Issue	Dept
Blue tongue response	(DARD)
EU School Milk Scheme	(DARD)
Fixed Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amdt) Regs	(DEL)
Draft Marine Bill – NI Response	(DOE)
Maternity and Parental Leave / Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amdt) Regs	(DEL)
Regulatory Reform for Qualifications – Next Steps	(DEL)
Flood Management Strategy	(DARD)
BIC Summit Meeting	(OFMDFM)
Employment and Support Allowance (Consequential Provisions No 2) Regulations 2008	(DSD)
The Social Security (Incapacity Benefit Work-Focused Interviews) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008	(DSD)
The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008	(DSD)

We have been informed by the relevant Departments that implementation of the recommendations in these papers does not give rise to significant associated costs.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development 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. (AQW 1193/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): The following answer relates to the Core Department and Agencies only.

The Department's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) holds carbon usage records. CAFRE has an Energy Strategy which aims to reduce carbon emissions through energy efficiency measures and maximising the use of renewable energy technology.

The implementation of this strategy has resulted in the reduction of CO₂ emissions by 11% (approx 500 tonnes) mainly through efficiencies in electricity and oil usage combined with investment in renewable technologies e.g wind turbines and biomass heating systems.

The Department has no current plans to use the purchase of carbon credits to offset carbon emissions.

Executive Meetings

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what areas of her Department's business are being held up by the Executive's failure to meet. (AQW 1197/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The North South Ministerial Council meeting in Agriculture Sectoral format which was scheduled for Friday 19 September could not take place due to the postponement of Executive meetings.

You may wish to note that Executive business may be dealt with by an 'urgent procedure' process.

There are no other areas of my Department's business that have been adversely affected by the postponement of Executive meetings.

Rivers Agency

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps the Rivers Agency is taking to prevent future flooding of areas in the Mid-Ulster constituency that were flooded this year. (AQW 1222/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: During the prolonged and heavy rainfall which

fell on 16 and 17 of August 2008 many areas across the province experienced flooding. Some emergency works have been completed by Rivers Agency at sites most affected, with other emergency works ongoing. Further to this, Rivers Agency is currently investigating the causes of the flooding throughout the province, including Mid-Ulster, along with the scope and viability of any additional remedial action. Any action identified would be subject to cost benefit analysis and, if viable, would be placed in the Agency's work programme along with other competing priorities.

The Agency will also continue to maintain designated watercourses and flood defences in the mid Ulster area to reduce the risk of flooding.

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many staff are employed in her Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1289/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are 9 staff employed in the DARD private Office. The costs for employing staff in 07/08 was £ 252,033.06. From April 2008 to September 2008 the costs were £167,923.86.

Northern Ireland Rivers and Waterways

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there is a computer based comprehensive map of the Northern Ireland Rivers and Waterways 100 Year Flood Plain. (AQW 1293/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) DARD Rivers Agency, in conjunction with DOE Planning Service, has developed a Strategic Flood Map for the North of Ireland which provides a high level overview of the natural flood risk from rivers and the sea to enable Government, industry, commerce, and the public to more effectively manage that risk.
- (ii) The map is scheduled to be published in November 2008 on the Rivers Agency's website, and is also available in other formats as required.
- (iii) The Flood Mapping Strategy published by DARD Rivers Agency indicated timescales for the delivery of various mapping products and outlined their means of delivery. These mapping products will provide refined information additional to that available for England and Wales. In the light of developments in relation to the implementation of the EU Floods Directive the Strategy will be reviewed and updated.

Northern Ireland Rivers and Waterways

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the computer based comprehensive map of the Northern Ireland Rivers and Waterways 100 Year Flood Plain will be available to the public on (i) her Departmental website; or (ii) the Rivers Agency website. (AQW 1296/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) DARD Rivers Agency, in conjunction with DOE Planning Service, has developed a Strategic Flood Map for the North of Ireland which provides a high level overview of the natural flood risk from rivers and the sea to enable Government, industry, commerce, and the public to more effectively manage that risk.
- (ii) The map is scheduled to be published in November 2008 on the Rivers Agency's website, and is also available in other formats as required.
- (iii) The Flood Mapping Strategy published by DARD Rivers Agency indicated timescales for the delivery of various mapping products and outlined their means of delivery. These mapping products will provide refined information additional to that available for England and Wales. In the light of developments in relation to the implementation of the EU Floods Directive the Strategy will be reviewed and updated.

Northern Ireland Rivers and Waterways

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, if a computer based comprehensive map for rivers and waterways has already been available on the internet for England and Wales since 2007, why Northern Ireland should have to wait until 2011, as is projected in the Flood Mapping Strategy (Interim), prepared by HR Wallingford. (AQW 1298/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) DARD Rivers Agency, in conjunction with DOE Planning Service, has developed a Strategic Flood Map for the North of Ireland which provides a high level overview of the natural flood risk from rivers and the sea to enable Government, industry, commerce, and the public to more effectively manage that risk.
- (ii) The map is scheduled to be published in November 2008 on the Rivers Agency's website, and is also available in other formats as required.

- (iii) The Flood Mapping Strategy published by DARD Rivers Agency indicated timescales for the delivery of various mapping products and outlined their means of delivery. These mapping products will provide refined information additional to that available for England and Wales. In the light of developments in relation to the implementation of the EU Floods Directive the Strategy will be reviewed and updated.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding is available from her Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1345/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 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. Local rural development strategies for Axis 3 of the RDP 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.

A Rural Anti-Poverty and Social Exclusion Framework is currently under development. Although the final detail of the framework has not yet been agreed it will include a Rural Childcare Programme with the aim of addressing rural specific need and circumstance. This programme will most likely be targeted at the not for profit sector and will be launched next year.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the annual cost to maintain her Departmental website. (AQW 1388/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The DARD website is co-ordinated by a small team with a network of content authors within business areas responsible for maintaining their own pages on the website. This activity only makes up a small percentage of time of the individuals involved and it is not possible to extract out the staff costs for this specific role.

The DARD site, in common with other NICS sites, is hosted centrally by Delivery and Innovation

Division, Department of Finance and Personnel.
Disaggregated costs for individual websites are not held.

DARD's annual domain name maintenance cost for www.dardni.gov.uk is £43.47.

SUSTRANS

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to ensure that funding for SUSTRANS continues beyond March 2009. (AQW 1428/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Sustrans does not receive core funding from my Department. They have received funding through the 2001-2006 Rural Development Programme to take forward projects which will cease in December 2008.

The new Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 will be delivered by District Councils coming together in clusters to work in partnership with locally formed Local Action Groups (LAGS)

When these LAGs open for applications, in the near future, Sustrans will have an opportunity, like many other organisations, to make applications to take forward specific projects.

Mauve Stinger Jellyfish

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to ensure that the mauve stinger jellyfish, recently found in Portrush, do not have the same detrimental effect as they did last year. (AQW 1448/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can respond to your question only in terms of the detrimental effects the mauve stinger jellyfish had last year on licensed salmon farms in Glenarm Bay and Red Bay owned by the Northern Salmon Company Limited.

On Sunday 5 October, a member of staff from the NI Environment Agency (NIEA) discovered mauve stinger jellyfish at the West Strand, Portrush, and DARD was alerted. Officials in my Department immediately contacted the Northern Salmon Company who confirmed they would monitor their sites for the presence of such jellyfish.

I should add that the Northern Salmon Company was awarded EU funding under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance on 5 September 2008 towards the cost of purchasing and installing a plankton and jellyfish mitigation system.

The NIEA and the Department of the Environment have overall responsibility for wildlife and conservation

issues. NIEA continues to monitor the situation and has advised coastal District Councils and the National Trust of the potential risk to bathers and surfers.

Health Certificates

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many health certificates have been issued for breeding sheep with Russia. (AQW 1502/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has not issued any health certificates in respect of breeding sheep destined for Russia.

Local Anglers

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she can provide assurances that the interests of local anglers and local angling groups will be upheld and protected in any decisions resulting from the consultation into the proposed regulation to open a permit fishery at Greenbraes on the River Foyle, between County Tyrone and County Donegal. (AQW 1578/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Regulations in respect of the development of the Greenbraes Fishery are being brought forward by the Loughs Agency and will require the approval of the North/South Ministerial Council. It is the Agency's objective to operate this fishery in line with its Mission Statement, to generate economic, social and environmental benefits from the resources of the Foyle and Carlingford catchments for the communities of those areas. The Agency is also committed to equality of opportunity for those wishing to enjoy these resources and specifically the Greenbraes Fishery.

Representatives of the Agency will be meeting local angling interests during the consultation period to hear their views and concerns. The Agency will give these and other responses to the consultation due consideration and amend or adjust the current proposals if appropriate to deliver the maximum benefit from this fishery in an equitable and transparent manner.

Little Acre Open Farm

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what her Department's officials discovered on the Little Acre Open Farm in Loughbrickland, on each of the 9 occasions they visited, over the last 2 years. (AQW 1626/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's findings on each of the 9 visits to Little Acre Open Farm in Loughbrickland over the last 2 years are outlined below.

- On 9 October 2006 a veterinary inspection took place in response to a complaint. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 14 August 2008 a veterinary inspection took place in response to a complaint about a duck swimming in dirty water. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 2 January 2008 A veterinary inspection was carried out for licensing as a Zoo. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 18 March 2008 A veterinary inspection was carried out following a complaint about overcrowding and insufficient water. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 13 May 2008 the premises were inspected following a complaint about overcrowding and insufficient water. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 25 July 2008 the premises were inspected following a complaint about overcrowding and insufficient water. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 15 August 2008 the premises were inspected following a complaint about overcrowding, dirty conditions and dead chickens. A small number of dead quail were found. The officer who carried out the inspection was satisfied that corrective action had been taken.
- On 22 September 2008 a veterinarian carried out routine Aujeszky's disease testing on pigs and found them to be in good condition no other animals on the premises were inspected.
- On 23 September 2008 an AHWI carried out a routine brucellosis test on cattle. All animals appeared to be in good condition though the AHWI suggested the possibility of some overcrowding with rabbits and advice was given.

A review of procedures will be commissioned following the final report on the Katesbridge inquiry.

Little Acre Open Farm

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons why her Department's officials visited Little Acre Open Farm in Loughbrickland on 9 occasions, over the last 2 years. (AQW 1627/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's findings on each of the 9 visits to Little Acre Open Farm in Loughbrickland over the last 2 years are outlined below.

- On 9 October 2006 a veterinary inspection took place in response to a complaint. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 14 August 2008 a veterinary inspection took place in response to a complaint about a duck swimming in dirty water. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 2 January 2008 A veterinary inspection was carried out for licensing as a Zoo. No welfare problems were evident.
- On 18 March 2008 A veterinary inspection was carried out following a complaint about overcrowding and insufficient water. No welfare problems were evident.
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A review of procedures will be commissioned following the final report on the Katesbridge inquiry.

Single Farm Payment Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give details of the contract given by her Department to an outside contractor for the management and administration of the single farm payment. (AQW 1664/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Single Farm Payment Scheme is administered and managed by personnel within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rural Payments and Inspection Division (RPID).

For the 2005, 2006 and 2007 scheme years, Fujitsu, a private sector contractor, undertook the transfer of information on Single Application Forms, to the

Department's computerised database. This activity was overseen by staff from Single Farm Payment Branch. From the 2008 scheme year, the Department's computer system was upgraded to facilitate electronic management of claim forms and an outside contractor is no longer involved in this keying process. The Department also has a contract in place with MM Teleperformance. They print, mail sort and issue the Single Farm Payment Application Pack, and other scheme bulk correspondence.

Confidential Data

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the steps her Department has taken to monitor the handling of confidential data, by outside contractors.
(AQW 1665/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD takes its Data Protection responsibilities very seriously and has implemented a number of policies and procedures to safeguard data. These procedures have been recently reviewed as part of the Department of Finance and Personnel, Data Protection review across all the North departments, agencies and Non Departmental Public Bodies.

A senior committee under the chair of a Deputy Secretary and reporting to the Departmental Board has overall responsibility for Data Protection with DARD's Internal Audit section specifically charged with examining Data Protection procedures as part of its audit of business areas. All key business IT systems are fully accredited with appropriate countermeasures in place and regular external reviews carried out.

Any potential breaches must be reported to internal audit and a thorough investigation is carried out on a case by case basis with every effort made to recover or delete data where appropriate.

Where external companies have access to DARD data as part of a contractual arrangement strict conditions for the maintenance of confidentiality and data security are written into each individual contract clearly detailing their Data Protection responsibilities, security clearance of external staff and the need for regular reviews.

Confidential Data

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the quality assurance checks that are in place to ensure that data remains confidential and to detail what procedures are

in place to recover data that has been mislaid or maladministered.
(AQW 1666/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD takes its Data Protection responsibilities very seriously and has implemented a number of policies and procedures to safeguard data. These procedures have been recently reviewed as part of the Department of Finance and Personnel, Data Protection review across all the North departments, agencies and Non departmental Public Bodies. Clear guidance has been issued to staff on their responsibilities in this area with regular reminders reinforcing the importance DARD attaches to safeguarding data. Tailored training has been provided for system managers including the need for them to check that appropriate quality assurance procedures are in place. Strict controls such as encryption of data in transit and restrictions on downloading data are in place.

A senior committee under the chair of a Deputy Secretary and reporting to the Departmental Board has overall responsibility for Data Protection with DARD's Internal Audit section specifically charged with examining Data Protection procedures as part of its audit of business areas. All key business IT systems are fully accredited with appropriate countermeasures in place and regular external reviews carried out.

Any potential breaches must be reported to internal audit and a thorough investigation is carried out on a case by case basis with every effort made to recover or delete data where appropriate.

Single Farm Payment Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail if her Department is aware of any administrative difficulties, discrepancies or errors, by the contractor for the management and administration of the single farm payment; and what action has been taken (i) to recover data; and (ii) to ensure that a repeat occurrence does not take place.
(AQW 1670/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a contract with MM Teleperformance to print, mail sort and issue the Single Application pack. About 40,000 packs are issued each year.

During the 2007 scheme year, one applicant advised the Department that their Single Application pack contained a form relating to another farm business and that the corresponding form for their own business was missing. The form, which was provided for the applicant to provide details of the bank account into which they wished their farm subsidy payments to be

paid, was pre-printed with the name and Identification Number of the farm business.

The Department undertook a check of other cases in the same batch to find if this applicant's form went to another. That was not the case and the other applicant involved got no form. To allay his concerns the first applicant was offered a change of Identification Number.

Additional Quality Assurance checks are now carried out both by the contractor and by Departmental staff to ensure that Single Application packs contain relevant enclosures.

From the 2008 scheme year, forms for registering bank account details are sent to farm businesses on an individual basis, and are not mailed as part of the Single Application pack.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the penalties that can be imposed in cases of animal cruelty. (AQW 1700/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 1972 it is an offence to cause cruelty or unnecessary suffering to any animal. A person convicted of cruelty to animals under the Act is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of £5000 and/or to imprisonment for 3 months. In addition, Courts may also disqualify anyone found guilty of cruelty from keeping animals.

You will wish to know that I am currently considering whether the level of penalties available to the Courts is a sufficient deterrent. This issue has been discussed during meetings with Stakeholders, and has been the subject of a number of recent letters to me and my officials.

It will form a significant part of my deliberations on what new animal welfare legislation may be needed here.

Nitrates Directive

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to extend the deadline for the nitrates directive that is due to end on 31 December 2008. (AQW 1749/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As we move towards completion of the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (FNMS), compliance with the Nitrates Directive is our top priority. The decision to extend the FNMS is not within my gift but is an issue of EU State Aid approval.

Since March 2008, I have been in discussions with the EU Commission about the FNMS deadline.

Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel, insists the Commission have no legal scope under Community Legislation to allow an extension of the Scheme beyond 31 December 2008. The Commission have stated that it is impossible to change the relevant EC legislation or the approval of the FNMS. Therefore, the FNMS will close on 31 December 2008.

We want to close the scheme in an orderly fashion and ensure that those who have substantially started work get it fully finished to secure both environmental benefit and compliance with the Nitrates Directive.

I fully recognise the December deadline creates difficulties for those who still have works to complete under the Scheme. The wet weather has added to these difficulties.

Next month, my officials will be writing to all applicants who have not yet submitted claims with details of closure procedures and how they should submit their claim.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Local Authority Playgrounds

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what percentage of local authority playgrounds have facilities suitable for children using wheelchairs. (AQW 1550/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): Responsibility for local authority recreational provision, including playgrounds, rests with district councils under Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not therefore retain information on the percentage of local authority playgrounds that have facilities suitable for children using wheel chairs.

NASCO (Europe)

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will take into account the assessment of NASCO (North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation) (Europe) that the heritage and culture of an industry should be respected when making decisions in regard to the fishing industry. (AQW 1194/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The principal objective of NASCO and its Contracting Parties in applying the precautionary approach to the conservation and management of Atlantic salmon is to protect the resource and preserve the environments in which it lives. Under the precautionary approach

priority should be given to conserving the productive capacity of the resource.

I am aware that NASCO has produced guidelines for incorporating social and economic factors in decisions under the precautionary approach and that NASCO agreements relating to fisheries management and stock rebuilding programmes generally reflect the need to take these factors, including heritage value of a fishery, into account. This has been done in the development of salmon conservation strategy. Consequently compensation has been offered to commercial salmon fishermen to cease fishing.

Pollution Damage

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to the answer to AQW 669/09, how much his Department has spent reinstating (i) rivers; (ii) fisheries; and (iii) other aquatic habitat, which have been damaged by pollution in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1207/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Fisheries Conservancy Board utilises compensation from polluters to reinstate affected fisheries in consultation with the fishery owner or lessee. This has traditionally involved restocking rivers and fisheries where fish have been killed by a pollution incident. Expenditure in each of the last 5 years was as follows.

RESTOCKING

2004	Nil
2005	Nil
2006	Nil
2007	£3,866.52
2008	£39,107.83

Sports and Recreation Facilities

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what money will be made available for sports and recreation facilities in the East Antrim constituency in (i) the current financial year; and (ii) 2009-10. (AQW 1483/09)

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. SNI is currently considering final awards, and assessing applications to, a number of its Exchequer and Lottery capital programmes. These include applications from owners and operators of sports and recreation facilities in the East Antrim constituency. Until that process is completed, it will

not be possible to confirm what money will be made available for sports and recreation facilities in the East Antrim constituency either in the current financial year or in 2009/10.

Newtownstewart Library

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what the proposed timetable is for the re-opening of Newtownstewart library. (AQW 1517/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Newtownstewart Branch library is currently undergoing a £470k renovation to provide suitable accommodation in which to deliver a full and comprehensive range of library services, including improved computing facilities and a community space. The library is due to re-open to the public in May 2009.

In the interim, Library services will be provided from the nearby community centre.

Fishing Clubs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what help he has given to fishing clubs to promote fishing in (i) youth groups; (ii) fishing festivals; and (iii) community events. (AQW 1520/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department assists angling clubs to promote fishing in a number of ways. The Department has not increased permit prices for juveniles and disabled anglers since 2003 in an effort to increase numbers of young anglers participating in the sport. The Department will provide organisers of charity, community or youth events with advice and guidance on any concessions available. Also, the Department can arrange visits of angling clubs and school groups to the Bush Salmon Station where they can learn about fisheries management as well as developing their interest in the sport.

Northern Ireland Football Matches

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to making representation to the UK Government that Northern Ireland football matches be added to the listed sporting events available to public broadcasters. (AQW 1605/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is developing a new 10 year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in Northern Ireland. The public broadcasting of sport generally, and the need to work through UK

structures to promote Northern Ireland as a world class venue for sports events, have emerged as important issues in the development of the Strategy. The possibility of making representations to the UK Government for Northern Ireland sports events, including football matches, to become listed events will be considered as part of the implementation of this Strategy.

EDUCATION

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail how her current proposals on post-primary transfer will impact upon schools operating under the Dickson Plan in North Armagh. (AQW 1071/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Chuir mé moltaí faoi bhráid an choiste feidhmiúcháin le haghaidh díospóireachta agus tá mé fós tiomanta do bhealach comhthoilíoch chun cinn a fháil, bunaithe ar na moltaí seo.

I have brought forward proposals to the Executive for discussion and I remain committed to seeking a consensual way forward based around those proposals.

My proposals are for the ending of academic selection by September 2013. For those grammar schools that need time to adjust to an all-ability intake, I am prepared to adopt a three-year phased approach with a reducing proportion of academic intake from 50% of grammar school admissions in 2010 to 30% in 2011 to 20% in 2012. These proposals will apply to admissions operated by the Dickson Plan 14-19 grammar schools in the same way as they do in the 11-19 grammar schools.

I consider however that the Dickson Plan schools, insofar as they already have 14 as the key educational decision point, are very well-placed to introduce what I regard ultimately as the fair and modern replacement for the academic selection at 11: informed election at 14, which provides great continuity for the Dickson Plan but without failing any more young people.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education 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. (AQW 1108/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní choinníonn an Roinn Oideachais (DE) féin taifid d'úsáid carbóin. Tugann DE eolas ar úsáid fhuinnimh don Roinn

Airgeadais agus Pearsanra a choinníonn taifid d'astuithe carbóin d'fhoirgnimh atá mar chuid d'eastát an rialtais i dtuaisceart na hÉireann.

The Department of Education (DE) does not maintain records of carbon usage. DE provides energy usage figures to the Department of Finance and Personnel who maintain records of carbon emissions for buildings within the government estate in the north of Ireland.

There are no current plans to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken.

Repair Budget for Schools

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) is the repair budget for East Belfast schools over the past five financial years; and (ii) the money spent on individual schools in the same period. (AQW 1203/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní shocraítear buiséad cothabhála na mBord do scoileanna ag leibhéal na scoileanna aonair, ach déantar tionscadail chothabhála de réir mar a bhíonn gá leo.

The Boards' maintenance budget for schools is not set at individual school level, but rather maintenance projects are carried out on the basis of need. Individual schools' delegated budgets contain an element for premises related costs, but do not have a specific maintenance element, and schools are free to determine how their funding is spent to meet their own priorities and needs.

The Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards have provided details of maintenance spend, including delegated spend by schools, in controlled and maintained schools for the period 2003/04 to 2007/08 and these are summarised in the table below. Figures for voluntary grammar schools and grant maintained integrated schools are not readily available.

MAINTENANCE SPENDING IN EAST BELFAST SCHOOLS

School Name	2003/ 04 (£)	2004/ 05 (£)	2005/ 06 (£)	2006/ 07 (£)	2007/ 08 (£)
Ashfield Boys' HS	309,090	76,538	54,253	62,308	67,911
Ashfield Girls' HS	128,077	53,378	29,858	29,924	27,254
Avoniel PS	126,345	30,155	12,117	19,894	24,532
Beechfield PS	51,975	10,599	7,566	6,093	11,255
Belmont PS	25,536	8,359	5,212	4,945	3,405
Branial PS	45,238	16,457	9,401	5,088	43,505
Castlereagh NS	15,102	8,873	15,156	10,788	8,231

School Name	2003/ 04 (£)	2004/ 05 (£)	2005/ 06 (£)	2006/ 07 (£)	2007/ 08 (£)
Clarawood Special School	18,101	21,531	13,499	14,350	8,110
Cregagh PS	1,352	1,844	6,114	3,159	14,703
Dundela Infants PS	48,506	18,381	9,753	8,110	9,896
Elmgrove PS	54,801	44,496	47,198	34,684	33,316
Euston Street PS	49,630	32,797	28,919	17,724	16,278
Gilnahirk PS	22,542	12,484	17,410	39,190	78,435
Glendhu NS	25,123	10,369	2,659	674	2,485
Greenwood Assessment Centre	13,554	1,283	27,515	11,189	7,565
Greenwood PS	18,052	8,180	60,492	13,871	12,888
Grosvenor GS	185,863	78,429	68,632	85,061	58,958
King's Road NS	80,994	29,190	7,143	2,183	39,232
Knockbreda NS	4,974	13,153	5,352	16,254	5,919
Knockbreda HS	77,477	53,325	40,969	36,976	29,274
Knockbreda PS	26,646	5,017	7,196	3,604	8,846
Knocknagoney PS	13,178	15,669	21,998	9,617	17,316
Lead Hill PS	16,787	12,491	5,040	14,090	18,332
Lisnasharragh HS	72,310	26,136	13,826	8,939	8,257
Lisnasharragh PS	11,683	18,214	6,677	5,830	11,962
Loughview IPS	10,154	1,880	11,186	10,401	33,742
McArthur NS	11,166	1,459	3,190	14,964	1,746
Mitchell House Special School	145,532	16,166	24,004	20,468	14,905
Orangefield HS	142,096	123,401	55,570	27,669	80,008
Orangefield PS	44,178	17,054	30,453	14,016	9,580
Ravenscroft NS	17,037	12,311	43,693	52,996	1,792
Sandbrook NS	10,858	6,225	28,592	10,163	4,307
St Bernard's PS	59,941	9,470	12,883	12,769	9,267
St Joseph's PS	15,087	13,285	6,961	6,949	16,039
St Matthew's PS	32,220	10,664	7,430	7,605	8,441
Strand PS	17,376	8,751	10,693	9,359	10,283
Strandtown PS	56,741	38,163	45,623	13,875	32,198
Sydenham Infants PS	10,849	9,305	4,619	7,988	12,464
Tullycarnet PS	13,069	8,927	5,835	4,093	12,564

Repair Budget for Schools

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the repair budget for schools in the Mid Ulster area, for each of the last 5 years; and (ii) the amount of money spent on individual schools, in the same period. (AQW 1264/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní shocraítear buiséad cothabhála na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne do scoileanna ag leibhéal na scoileanna aonair, ach déantar tionscadail chothabhála de réir mar a bhíonn gá leo.

The Education and Library Boards' maintenance budget for schools is not set at individual school level, but rather maintenance projects are carried out on the basis of need. Individual schools' delegated budgets contain an element for premises-related costs, but do not have a specific maintenance element, and schools are free to determine how their funding is spent to meet their own priorities and needs.

The Southern and North Eastern Education and Library Boards have provided details of maintenance spend, including delegated spend by schools, in controlled and maintained schools for the period 2003/04 to 2007/08 and these are summarised in the table below. Figures for voluntary grammar schools and grant maintained integrated schools are not readily available.

MAINTENANCE SPENDING ON SCHOOLS IN MID ULSTER

School Name	2003/ 04 (£)	2004/ 05 (£)	2005/ 06 (£)	2006/ 07 (£)	2007/ 08 (£)
Altayeskey PS	1,680	6,299	1,409	4,413	11,006
Ampertaine PS	4,344	3,004	4,264	4,873	29,284
Anahorish PS	10,276	9,360	12,217	10,405	34,126
Aughamullan PS	2,725	4,074	1,474	3,826	2,993
Ballylifford PS	12,329	6,918	6,463	2,677	1,534
Ballynease PS	4,322	13,840	11,285	17,121	22,114
Ballytrea PS	6,344	6,244	5,388	14,972	75,352
Bellaghy PS	6,510	3,086	9,129	4,033	12,220
Bush PS	22,523	15,837	5,898	5,164	9,288
Castledawson PS	7,165	4,138	9,766	5,994	14,429
Churchtown PS	5,631	4,112	1,938	2,347	2,661
Coagh PS	2,712	6,784	7,568	4,723	24,458
Cookstown HS	256,740	112,014	82,986	87,182	124,471
Cookstown NS	4,389	5,856	10,053	6,272	5,166
Cookstown PS	116,950	16,483	62,258	19,182	38,177
Crievagh PS	3,381	4,332	1,740	2,661	7,303
Crossroads PS	4,823	2,688	8,649	4,640	9,563

School Name	2003/ 04 (£)	2004/ 05 (£)	2005/ 06 (£)	2006/ 07 (£)	2007/ 08 (£)
Culnady PS	42,628	14,234	4,518	4,832	9,859
Derrychrin PS	93,559	8,116	2,449	4,097	36,113
Desertmartin PS	6,688	1,965	12,309	1,712	6,837
Donaghey PS	6,084	4,832	4,923	5,406	7,319
Donaghmore PS	7,971	2,176	5,487	9,636	25,224
Drumard PS	4,287	5,328	5,201	8,953	29,007
Edendork PS	5,651	9,908	7,433	6,990	6,112
Gaelscoil na Speiríní	0	0	0	291	6,339
Gaelscoil uí Néill	15,285	780	1,315	1,710	4,914
Greenlough PS (St Mary's)	16,317	23,239	10,270	4,732	34,059
Holy Family PS	23,182	9,008	14,738	9,955	30,940
Holy Trinity College	96,832	58,239	39,995	33,280	75,510
Holy Trinity PS	8,018	11,804	12,565	25,700	72,191
Kilronan Special School	24,950	10,682	13,433	12,688	18,170
Kilross PS	5,102	4,924	14,211	3,593	14,984
Knockloughrim PS	10,570	5,644	17,413	7,568	11,761
Knocknagin PS	10,653	9,564	1,566	1,713	6,254
Lissan (I) PS	6,253	9,834	7,095	3,196	9,268
Little Flower NS	5,202	943	6,920	6,552	6,206
Maghera HS	151,629	51,876	63,594	78,592	64,569
Maghera PS	16,390	3,764	10,890	5,118	31,002
Magherafelt Controlled PS	33,842	20,167	30,811	15,716	17,603
Magherafelt HS	171,475	32,327	43,896	43,269	48,819
Magherafelt NS	10,192	5,770	7,552	7,406	5,426
Moneymore PS	31,045	12,764	14,396	6,258	11,387
New Row PS	11,880	6,212	3,080	9,063	13,695
Newmill PS	6,367	5,729	1,859	10,553	4,874
Orritor PS	16,128	22,446	2,838	6,614	9,756
Phoenix IPS	0	0	3,021	1,133	1,477
Primate Dixon PS	53	30,179	28,962	11,823	45,250
Queen Elizabeth II (Pomeroy) PS	13,897	5,249	1,867	597	24,336
Sacred Heart PS, Rock	10,965	3,843	10,131	17,772	15,738

School Name	2003/ 04 (£)	2004/ 05 (£)	2005/ 06 (£)	2006/ 07 (£)	2007/ 08 (£)
Sperrin Integrated College	300	2,603	4,365	0	22,995
Spires IPS	3,092	2,261	2,338	9,021	3,614
St Brigid's PS, Knockloughrim	9,631	10,841	11,669	7,602	7,764
St Brigid's PS, Coalisland	17,181	15,857	9,799	14,314	4,827
St Brigid's PS, Tirkane	7,333	4,142	4,790	7,619	15,520
St Colm's HS	59,267	28,685	26,979	25,763	66,443
St Columba's PS	3,759	3,089	5,016	5,746	12,506
St Columba's PS, Cullion	177,515	4,015	1,760	39,911	6,998
St Eoghan's PS	33,280	43,847	5,356	5,442	27,820
St John's PS, Maghera	17,644	3,038	9,721	6,457	30,767
St John's PS, Dungannon	5,834	3,648	4,646	8,785	11,972
St Joseph's HS	50,261	71,193	16,779	56,043	77,707
St Joseph's PS, Dungannon	6,732	4,119	3,478	10,905	55,621
St Joseph's PS, Cookstown	6,151	6,833	8,067	16,665	5,014
St Malachy's PS	11,747	5,889	3,058	4,316	5,963
St Mary's College	35,761	22,254	26,092	25,517	62,275
St Mary's PS, Magherafelt	32,782	7,846	3,637	4,897	12,179
St Mary's PS, Bellaghy	21,260	9,007	5,258	7,844	13,245
St Mary's PS, Dungannon	19,153	5,755	2,942	4,749	1,338
St Mary's PS, Stewartstown	4,546	24,805	1,929	7,369	4,283
St Mary's PS, Cookstown	5,332	5,394	9,755	18,788	14,398
St Mary's PS, Pomeroy	105,796	19,206	2,473	6,934	17,819
St Mary's PS, Maghera	106,954	19,008	9,916	13,059	17,766
St Patrick's Co-Ed Comprehensive College	197,882	82,697	120,523	119,512	155,213
St Patrick's PS, Loup	11,329	7,072	2,148	2,071	2,919

School Name	2003/ 04 (£)	2004/ 05 (£)	2005/ 06 (£)	2006/ 07 (£)	2007/ 08 (£)
St Patrick's PS, Pomeroy Road, Dungannon	2,831	4,428	3,025	3,297	1,770
St Patrick's PS, Mullanahoe Road, Dungannon	1,220	22,968	1,026	2,478	13,656
St Patrick's PS, Coalisland	6,638	12,315	4,421	15,094	32,379
St Patrick's PS, Moneymore	10,822	4,045	3,708	3,621	95,027
St Patrick's PS, Glen Road, Maghera	8,588	6,317	6,291	4,745	19,994
St Peter's PS	4,092	29,539	6,042	6,058	56,979
St Pius X College	24,554	22,496	27,679	59,558	80,894
St Trea's PS	15,753	4,558	28,204	32,607	18,917
Stewartstown PS	2,804	4,494	3,129	3,388	2,822
Tobermore PS	4,863	4,469	5,696	3,723	13,742
Woods PS	2,723	2,712	2,553	8,724	7,166

Specialised Reading Centres

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many children (i) were assessed; and (ii) successfully gained a place, at specialised reading centres in the (a) Western; and (b) Southern, Education and Library Board areas. (AQW 1285/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabhairlainne an Deiscirt agus an Iarthair nach bhfuil ionad speisialaithe léitheoireachta acu faoi láthair.

Soláthraítear tacaíocht tríd an tSéirbhís Tacaíochta Litearthachta a bhíonn ag gach Bord.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Southern and Western Education and Library Boards that neither Board currently has a specialised reading centre.

Support is provided through each Board's Literacy Support Service.

Children Expelled

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many children have been expelled from school in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1306/09)

The Minister of Education: Statistics on pupil expulsions are collected, at the end of each school year, from Education and Library Boards and published on the Department's website at www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils_parents-pg/pupils_parents-suspensions_and_expulsions_pg.htm.

Léirítear sa tábla thíos líon na ndaltaí ar díbríodh ón scoil iad, i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabhairlainne sna scoilbhianta 2004/05, 2005/06 agus 2006/07:-

The table below provides the number of pupils expelled in each Education and Library Board in the 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 school years:-

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2004/05	7	11	26	9	10	63
2005/06	7	8	16	7	16	54
2006/07	6	12	15	5	7	45

Statistics for the 2007/08 school year are currently being analysed and will be published in the coming weeks.

Teachers Refusing to Teach Pupils

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many instances of teachers refusing to teach pupils have been recorded, in each Education and Library Board, in each of the last 3 years; and what was the outcome of each incident. (AQW 1307/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas mar a thugann na scoileanna do na Boird Oideachais agus Leabhairlainne:

The information as provided by schools to the Education and Library Boards is as follows:

2006/07

Board	Instances	Outcome
SEELB	1	Resolved following discussion with the Labour Relations Agency

2007/08

Board	Instances	Outcome
SEELB	1	Resolved following discussions with the school staff

2008/09

Board	Instances	Outcome
SEELB	1	Ongoing
NEELB	1	Pupil taught by external tutor until the pupil left the school on reaching compulsory school leaving age

Primary Schools in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the primary schools in the North Down constituency that are over subscribed for the current academic year. (AQW 1311/09)

The Minister of Education:

Tá tugtha le fios don Roinn ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt gurb iad seo a leanas na bunscoileanna agus na hiarbhunscoileanna i dtoghcheantair Dhún Thuaidh ar a bhfuil róshuibscríobh orthu don bhliain reatha acadúil:

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that the primary schools and post-primary schools in the North Down constituency that are over subscribed for the current academic year are as follows:

Primary

- Ballyholme Primary School
- Grange Park Primary School
- Kilmaine Primary School
- Ballymagee Primary School
- Bangor Central Primary School
- Glencraig Primary School

Post Primary

- Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College
- St Columbanus' College
- Glenlola Collegiate
- Bangor Grammar School
- Sullivan Upper School

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that they do not collect data on admissions to preparatory departments.

Post-Primary Schools in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the post-primary schools in the North Down constituency, that are over subscribed, for the current academic year. (AQW 1312/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios don Roinn ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt gurb iad seo a leanas na bunscoileanna agus na hiarbhunscoileanna i dtoghcheantair Dhún Thuaidh ar a bhfuil róshuibscríobh orthu don bhliain reatha acadúil:

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that the primary schools and post-primary schools in the North Down

constituency that are over subscribed for the current academic year are as follows:

Primary

- Ballyholme Primary School
- Grange Park Primary School
- Kilmaine Primary School
- Ballymagee Primary School
- Bangor Central Primary School
- Glencraig Primary School

Post Primary

- Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College
- St Columbanus' College
- Glenlola Collegiate
- Bangor Grammar School
- Sullivan Upper School

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that they do not collect data on admissions to preparatory departments.

Education and Library Board Land

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education if the money generated from the sale of Education and Library Board land can be retained for use in that area. (AQW 1314/09)

The Minister of Education: I gcomhthéacs Stratéis Infheistíochta an Fheidhmeannais, aithnítear agus déantar breithniú ar fháltais fhéideartha ó dhíol an talaimh ag aon Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus cinneadh á dhéanamh ar leibhéal foriomlán na n-achmhainní atá le hinfheistiú thar an eastát oideachais.

In the context of the Executive's Investment Strategy the potential proceeds from the sale of land by an Education and Library Board are identified and taken into consideration when determining the overall level of resources to be invested across the education estate. This strategic approach ensures resources are allocated on the basis of investment need rather than being retained in areas where they happen to occur.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education what funding is available from her Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1353/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhliain airgeadais seo bíonn na séirbhísí Home Start in úsáid ag naoi gcinn de na tionscadail Sure Start a fuair maoiniú ón Roinn seo. Tá beagnach £258K de phríomhbhuiséad Sure

Start á úsáid le tacaíocht a thabhairt do thuismitheoirí a bhfuil clann óg acu tríd an chlár Home Start.

Within this current financial year nine of the Sure Start projects funded by my Department are utilising the services of Home Start. Approximately £258K of the core Sure Start budget is being used to provide support to parents with young families through the Home Start programme.

Primary Languages Programme

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to list the primary schools that are participating in the Primary Languages Programme, broken down by (i) parliamentary constituency; and (ii) the language the school is teaching as part of the programme.

(AQW 1367/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá 266 bunscoil ag glacadh páirte sa Chlár Teangacha Bunscoile faoi láthair, mar atá mionsonraithe sna táblaí thíos.

There are 266 primary schools currently participating in the Primary Languages Programme, as detailed in the tables below. A further 58 primary schools are currently awaiting the allocation of language tutors. In addition to this, I have this year made available additional funding, which will mean that still more primary pupils will benefit from the Programme.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS CURRENTLY PARTICIPATING IN THE PRIMARY LANGUAGES PROGRAMME

CONSTITUENCY – SOUTH ANTRIM

School	Language
Antrim Primary School	Spanish
Creavery Primary School	Spanish
Parkhall Primary School	Spanish
Crumlin Primary School	Spanish
Groggan Primary School	Spanish
Loanends Primary School	Spanish
Mount St Michael's Primary School, Randalstown	Spanish
Mossley Primary School	Spanish
Tír-na-nÓg Primary School	Spanish
Ballynure Primary School	Spanish
Ballyhenry Primary School	Spanish
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	Spanish
St Joseph's Primary School, Crumlin	Spanish
Straidhavern Primary School	Spanish
Carnmoney Primary School	Spanish

School	Language
Earlview Primary School	Spanish
Mallusk Primary School	Spanish
St Mary's on the Hill Primary School	Spanish
Templepatrick Primary School	Spanish
Carlane Primary School	Spanish
Duneane Primary School	Spanish
Mossgrove Primary School	Spanish
Straid Primary School	Spanish
Doagh Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – NORTH ANTRIM

School	Language
Barnish Primary School	Irish
St Mary's Primary School, Cushendall	Irish
St Patrick's Primary School, Ballymena	Irish
Buick Memorial Primary School	Spanish
Portglenone Primary School	Spanish
Leaney Primary School	Spanish
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Landhead Primary School	Spanish
St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle	Spanish
Fourtowns Primary School	Spanish
Gracehill Primary School	Spanish
Longstone Primary School	Spanish
Ballykeel Primary School	Spanish
Broughshane Primary School	Spanish
Carniny Primary School	Spanish
Dunclug Primary School	Spanish
Hazelbank Primary School	Spanish
Kells & Connor Primary School, Ballycastle	Spanish
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymena	Spanish
St Ciarán's Primary School, Cushendun	Spanish
Armoy Primary School	Spanish
Bushmills Primary School	Spanish
Kilmoyle Primary School	Spanish
St Olcán's Primary School	Spanish
Straidbilly Primary School	Spanish
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymoney	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Ballymena	Spanish

School	Language
Garryduff Primary School	Spanish
St Brigid's Primary School, Cloughmills	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – EAST ANTRIM

School	Language
St Nicholas' Primary School, Carrickfergus	Irish
Acorn Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Oakfield Primary School	Spanish
Olderfleet Primary School	Spanish
Kilcoan Primary School	Spanish
Victoria Primary School, Carrickfergus	Spanish
Ballycarry Primary School	Spanish
St James' Primary School, Newtownabbey	Spanish
Greenisland Primary School	Spanish
Carrickfergus Model Primary School	Spanish
Lourdes Primary School, Carrickfergus	Spanish
Silverstream Primary School	Spanish
Whitehead Primary School	Spanish
Glynn Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – SOUTH DOWN

School	Language
St Patrick's Primary School, Hilltown	Irish
St Malachy's Primary School, Castletwellan	Irish
Christ the King Primary School, Ballynahinch	Irish
Holy Family Primary School, Downpatrick	Irish
Sacred Heart Primary School, Newcastle	Irish
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche	Spanish
Cumran Primary School	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Saintfield	Spanish
Drumadonnell Primary School	Spanish
St Colmán's Primary School, Banbridge	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle	Spanish
St Patrick's Primary School (Burrenreagh)	Spanish
St Brigid's Primary School, Downpatrick	Spanish
St Joseph's Primary School, Killough	Spanish
St Patrick's Boys Primary School	Spanish
Cedar Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Glasswater Primary School	Spanish

School	Language
St Joseph's Primary School, Crossgar	Spanish
St Macartan's Primary School, Loughinisland	Spanish
Holy Cross Primary School, Kilkeel	Spanish
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Moneydarragh Primary School	Spanish
St Joseph's Primary School, Strangford	Spanish
St Malachy's Primary School, Strangford	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – NORTH DOWN

School	Language
Hollywood Primary School	Spanish
St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – UPPER BANN

School	Language
St Brendan's Primary School, Craigavon	Irish
St Mary's Primary School, Craigavon	Irish
St Patrick's Primary School, Magheralin	Irish
Hart Memorial Primary School	Spanish
Portadown Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Richmount Primary School	Spanish
Seagoe Primary School	Spanish
Milltown Primary School	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge	Spanish
St Patrick's Primary School, Craigavon	Spanish
St Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan	Spanish
Donacloney Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – NEWRY & ARMAGH

School	Language
Our Lady's Primary School	Irish
Mount St Catherine's Primary School	Irish
St Malachy's Primary School, Camlough	Irish
St Patrick's Primary School, Armagh	Irish
Lisnadill Primary School	Spanish
Cloughoge Primary School	Spanish
Jonesborough Primary School	Spanish
Poyntzpass Primary School	Spanish
St Clare's Convent Primary School	Spanish
St Colmán's Abbey Primary School	Spanish

School	Language
St Josephs and St James Primary School	Spanish
St Joseph's Primary School, Killeavy	Spanish
St Malachy's Primary School, Carnagat	Spanish
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Loughall	Spanish
Windsor Hill Primary School	Spanish
Clea Primary School	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Armagh	Spanish
Armstrong Primary School	Spanish
Hardy Memorial Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – MID ULSTER

School	Language
St Joseph's Primary School, Cookstown	Irish
Greenlough Primary School (St Mary's)	Irish
St John Bosco Primary School Ballynease	Spanish
Donaghmore Primary School	Spanish
Bush Primary School	Spanish
Ampertaine Primary School	Spanish
Culnady Primary School	Spanish
Drumard Primary School	Spanish
Gaelscoil na Spéiríní	Spanish
Knockloughrim Primary School	Spanish
St Brigid's Primary School Tirkane	Spanish
Tobermore Primary School	Spanish
Ballylifford Primary School	Spanish
Castledawson Primary School	Spanish
Cookstown Primary School	Spanish
Magherafelt Controlled Primary School	Spanish
Lissan Primary School	Spanish
Spires Integrated Primary School	Spanish
St Columb's Primary School (Cullion)	Spanish
St Patrick's Primary School Loup	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Cookstown	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Magherafelt	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – STRANGFORD

School	Language
St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff	Irish
St Caolán's Primary School	Irish
Millennium Integrated Primary School	Irish

School	Language
Ballycloughan Primary School	Spanish
Carryduff Primary School	Spanish
Newtownards Model Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – WEST TYRONE

School	Language
All Saints Primary School, Omagh	Irish
Drumnabey Primary School	Irish
Knocknagor Primary School	Irish
Drumduff Primary School	Irish
St Joseph's Primary School, Omagh	Irish
St Matthew's Primary School, Dungannon	Irish
St Patrick's Primary School, Castlederg	Irish
St Patrick's Primary School, Carrickmore	Irish
St Seire's Primary School	Irish
St Teresa's Primary School, Omagh	Irish
Tummery Primary School	Irish
St Brigid's Primary School, Omagh	Irish
Recarson Primary School	Irish
Bready Jubilee Primary School	Spanish
Christ the King Primary School, Omagh	Spanish
Cooley Primary School	Spanish
Dunmullan Primary School	Spanish
Bridgehill Primary School	Spanish
Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh	Spanish
Sion Mills Primary School	Spanish
St Anne's Primary School, Strabane	Spanish
St Mary's Girls' Primary School, Strabane	Spanish
St Patrick's Primary School, Omagh	Spanish
Gaelscoil na gCrann	Spanish
St Columbkille's Primary School	Spanish
Queen Elizabeth II Primary School	Spanish
Loreto Convent Primary School	Spanish
Gortnagarn Primary School	Spanish
Envagh Primary School	Spanish
Donemana Primary School	Spanish
Edwards Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – FERMANAGH & SOUTH TYRONE

School	Language
St John's Primary School, Moy	Irish
St Mary's Primary School, Ballygawley	Irish
St Brigid's Primary School, Augher	Irish
St Mary's Primary School, Aughnacloy	Irish
Moat Primary School	Spanish
St Eugene's Primary School, Lisnakea	Spanish
Blessed Patrick O'Loughran Primary School	Spanish
Howard Primary School	Spanish
Lisferty Primary School	Spanish
Maguiresbridge Primary School	Spanish
Brookeborough Primary School	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Maguiresbridge	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Bellanaleck	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Derrylin	Spanish
St Nailes Primary School	Spanish
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	Spanish
Lisbellaw Primary School	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Tempo	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – LAGAN VALLEY

School	Language
St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg	Irish
Brownlee Primary School	Spanish
Riverdale Primary School	Spanish
St Aloysius Primary School	Spanish
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn	Spanish
Ballymacrickett Primary School	Spanish
St Michael's Primary School (Finnis)	Spanish
Dunmurry Primary School	Spanish
Christ the Redeemer Primary School	Spanish
Killowen Primary School	Spanish
Fort Hill Primary School	Spanish
Seymour Hill Primary School	Spanish
Lower Ballinderry Primary School	Spanish
Ballycarrickmaddy Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – BELFAST EAST

School	Language
St Joseph's Primary School, Ballyhackamore	Spanish

School	Language
Euston Street Primary School	Spanish
Knocknagoney Primary School	Spanish
Lisnasharragh Primary School	Spanish
St Bernard's Primary School, Knockbreda	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – BELFAST SOUTH

School	Language
Fane Street Primary School	Spanish
Forge Integrated Primary School	Spanish
St Michael's Primary School, Ravenhill	Spanish
Taughmonagh Primary School	Spanish
Donegall Road Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – BELFAST NORTH

School	Language
Holy Cross Boys' Primary School	Irish
Seaview Primary School	Spanish
St Therese of Lisieux Primary School	Spanish
Wheatfield Primary School	Spanish
Whitehouse Primary School	Spanish
Holy Family Primary School	Spanish
Mercy Primary School	Spanish
Glenwood Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – BELFAST WEST

School	Language
St Kieran's Primary School, Dunmurry	Irish
St Mary's Primary School, Divis Street	Spanish
Malvern Primary School	Spanish
St John the Baptist Boys' Primary School	Spanish
St John the Baptist Girls' Primary School	Spanish
St Mark's Primary School, Dunmurry	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – EAST DERRY

School	Language
Portrush Primary School	Spanish
Portstewart Primary School	Spanish
Kilrea Primary School	Spanish
Ballysally Primary School	Spanish
Carnalridge Primary School	Spanish
Castleroe Primary School	Spanish

School	Language
Limavady Central Primary School	Spanish
Irish Society's Primary School	Spanish
Damhead Primary School	Spanish
Culcrow Primary School	Spanish
St Patrick's Primary School, Portrush	Spanish
St Aidan's Primary School Magilligan	Spanish
Millstrand Integrated Primary School	Spanish

CONSTITUENCY – FOYLE

School	Language
Fountain Primary School	Spanish
Gaelscoil Eadain Mhóir	Spanish
Ebrington Controlled Primary School	Spanish
Glendermott Primary School	Spanish
Good Shepherd PS and Nursery School	Spanish
Newbuildings Primary School	Spanish
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Derry	Spanish
Holy Family Primary School, Derry	Spanish
Cumber Claudy Primary School	Spanish
Drumahoe Primary School	Spanish
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	Spanish
St Colmcille's Primary School, Claudy	Spanish
St Mary's Primary School, Claudy	Spanish

Musical Instrument Tutors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education for an update on the business case for musical instrument tutors' pay; and if they will be granted a retrospective pay rise. (AQW 1368/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department is currently considering the business case from the employers' side of the Joint Negotiating Committee (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.

Maidir le hathruithe ar bith ar théarmaí agus ar choinníollacha na mball foirne seo, lena n-áirítear ardú pá cúlghabhálach, is ceist í sin do na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne le breathnú a dhéanamh uirthi, mar fhostóirí, faoi réir bheartas an Rialtais maidir le pá agus laistigh de shrianta na n-acmhainní atá ar fáil.

Any changes to the terms and conditions of these staff, including the granting of a retrospective pay rise, 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.

Cost of School Transportation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school transportation by way of taxis, for pupils attending controlled secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1399/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated sector cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla seo thíos caiteachas a thabhaíodh trí sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bliana anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Controlled & Maintained Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	£185k	£261k	£99k	£295k	£196k	£1,036k
	2004/05	£144k	£165k	£83k	£298k	£234k	£924k
	2005/06	£190k	£156k	£78k	£107k	£309k	£840k
	2006/07	£112k	£180k	£67k	£72k	£401k	£832k
	2007/08	£124k	£121k	£49k	£71k	£108k	£473k

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Grant-Maintained Integrated Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	
	2004/05	£15k	£24k	£19k	£114k	£51k	£223k
	2005/06	£14k	£18k	£18k	£49k	£74k	£173k
	2006/07	£34k	£8k	£15k	£29k	£26k	£112k
	2007/08	£38k	£6k	£18k	£33k	£16k	£111k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Cost of School Transportation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school transportation by way of taxis, for pupils attending maintained secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1400/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained

Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated sector cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla seo thíos caiteachas a thabhaíodh trí sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bliana anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Controlled & Maintained Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	£185k	£261k	£99k	£295k	£196k	£1,036k
	2004/05	£144k	£165k	£83k	£298k	£234k	£924k
	2005/06	£190k	£156k	£78k	£107k	£309k	£840k
	2006/07	£112k	£180k	£67k	£72k	£401k	£832k
	2007/08	£124k	£121k	£49k	£71k	£108k	£473k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	
	2004/05	£15k	£24k	£19k	£114k	£51k	£223k
	2005/06	£14k	£18k	£18k	£49k	£74k	£173k
	2006/07	£34k	£8k	£15k	£29k	£26k	£112k
	2007/08	£38k	£6k	£18k	£33k	£16k	£111k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

Cost of School Transportation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school transportation by way of taxis, for pupils attending integrated secondary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board, for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1401/09)

The Minister of Education: Unfortunately not all of the information requested is available in the required format. Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained post primary schools, also, separate statistics are only available for Grant-Maintained Integrated schools – not the integrated sector as a whole. Furthermore, detailed expenditure statistics

are not held by the Department prior to 2004/05, as such, information pertaining to the Grant-Maintained Integrated sector cannot be split between primary and post-primary prior to 2004/05.

Léiríonn an tábla seo thíos caiteachas a thabhaíodh trí sholáthar tacsaithe le cúig bliana anuas i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne:

The table below shows expenditure incurred through the provision of taxis, over the last five years in each of the Education and Library Boards:

		BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled & Maintained Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	£185k	£261k	£99k	£295k	£196k	£1,036k
	2004/05	£144k	£165k	£83k	£298k	£234k	£924k
	2005/06	£190k	£156k	£78k	£107k	£309k	£840k
	2006/07	£112k	£180k	£67k	£72k	£401k	£832k
	2007/08	£124k	£121k	£49k	£71k	£108k	£473k
Grant-Maintained Integrated Post-Primary Schools	2003/04	#	#	#	#	#	
	2004/05	£15k	£24k	£19k	£114k	£51k	£223k
	2005/06	£14k	£18k	£18k	£49k	£74k	£173k
	2006/07	£34k	£8k	£15k	£29k	£26k	£112k
	2007/08	£38k	£6k	£18k	£33k	£16k	£111k

Figures not held prior to 2004/05

School Meals

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education what steps her Department is taking to increase the provision and uptake of healthy school meals in primary schools. (AQW 1441/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education began the process of improving food in schools by implementing a pilot project in around 100 schools during 2004 to test the reaction to the introduction of compulsory nutritional standards for school meals. As a result the Department, in conjunction with the Education and Library Boards and other school authorities, began to introduce the standards to schools during the autumn 2005 term and they are now in place in all schools here. The standards have been updated in 2007 and 2008 to clarify some aspects and provide additional guidance for schools.

Beidh an Roinn ag cur maoinithe de bhreis agus £3 mhilliún ar fáil sa bhliain le cinntiú go mbíonn luach chion an bhia atá i mbéilte scoile 50p ar a laghad sna naíonraí, sna bunscoileanna agus sna scoileanna speisialta agus 60p ar a laghad sna hiarbhunscoileanna.

The Department is also making available additional funding of over £3 million per annum to ensure that the food content value of school meals is a minimum of 50p in nursery, primary and special schools and a minimum of 60p in post-primary schools.

In tandem with the introduction of nutritional standards the Department has been working with the Education and Library Boards and the Health Promotion and Food Standards Agencies on a communications campaign to publicise its food in schools initiative and is working to a January 2009 launch date for this.

Bullying in Schools

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education what research her Department has conducted into the effect of stress caused by bullying in schools. (AQW 1443/09)

The Minister of Education: In June 2007, the Department published a research report on “The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland”. It did not focus specifically on the effect of stress caused by bullying in schools.

The Department is co-operating with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in promoting research with 15-16 year old pupils on a range of issues, including stressors, related to their lifestyle and well-being. Work began in September 2008 and a report on the findings is expected in August 2009.

Tá Clár um Fholláine agus Leas Mothúchán na nDaltaí á fhorbairt ag an Roinn fosta, i gcomhar leis na príomhpháirtithe leasmhara san earnáil reachtúil, san earnáil dheonach agus san earnáil phobail. Táthar ag díriú ar dtús ar earnáil na hiarbhunscolaíochta.

The Department is also developing a Pupil Emotional Health and Well-Being Programme, in partnership with key statutory, voluntary and community sector stakeholders. The initial focus is on the post-primary sector.

School Places

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many applications for school places were made on a fraudulent basis, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1444/09)

The Minister of Education: Following a judgement of the High Court in 2007, the Department issued guidance to schools on their duty to verify information contained within applications if, at the point of applying

its admissions criteria, a school has general knowledge or belief of a problem with false information within applications. Revised guidance for this year's admissions process was issued by the Department to schools on 19 September 2008.

Mar sin de, bíonn an próiseas seo faoi bhainistiú Bhoird Gobharnóirí Scoile mar chuid den ról atá acu mar údaráis iontrálacha. Ar ócáid amháin, i gcás a bhí os comhair na hArd-Chúirte, cuireadh an Roinn ar an eolas faoi áit scoile a tharraing Bord Gobharnóirí Scoile siar as siocair nach raibh an tuismitheoir ábalta an t-eolas deimhnithe a iarradh a chur ar fáil.

This process is therefore managed by the Boards of Governors of schools in their role as admissions authorities. On one occasion, again involving a case before the High Court, the Department was made aware of a school place being withdrawn by the Board of Governors of a school after the parent was unable to provide the requested verifying information. However the number of occasions when schools have not offered a place or have withdrawn a place as a result of the failure to provide verifying information is not recorded.

Kid's Life and Times Survey 2008

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the Kid's Life and Times Survey 2008 findings that the majority of P7 pupils interviewed want academic selection at age 11 to be retained.
(AQW 1446/09)

The Minister of Education: Is é mo thuairim ná go bhfuil torthaí an tsuirbhé seo neamhchonclúideach. Is féidir sleachta as na torthaí a chur i láthair mar argóintí i bhfabhar nó in aghaidh roghnaithe acadúla.

My assessment is that the findings from this survey are inconclusive. Extracts from the findings can be presented as arguments in support of, or against, academic selection. For example, I am not surprised to learn that the children most likely to want to keep the transfer test are those who fare well because of it. The fact remains that academic selection serves a minority of children well, but does a great disservice to the majority, and the inequalities associated with it need to be addressed, a fact recognised in a recent report published by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Effect of Stress

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education what research her Department has conducted into the effect of stress on (i) teachers and; (ii) the academic performance of pupils.
(AQW 1455/09)

The Minister of Education:

- (i) Thug an Roinn maoiniú don 2001 Teachers' Health and Wellbeing Survey a rinneadh ar son fhostóirí na múinteoirí ag Pricewaterhouse Coopers.
- (ii) The Department funded the 2001 Teachers' Health and Wellbeing Survey undertaken on behalf of teachers' employers by Pricewaterhouse Coopers. The survey examined various aspects of teachers' health and wellbeing, including stress, diet, weight, exercise, alcohol consumption, smoking and general job satisfaction. A report was published in June 2002 and a copy is available in the Assembly library.
- (iii) None.

Children with Cerebral Palsy

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the benefits of conductive education as an additional resource for children who have cerebral palsy.
(AQW 1514/09)

The Minister of Education: It is the responsibility of the education and library boards, with professional advice from the health and social care trusts, to consider what an appropriate resource is for a child with cerebral palsy in a special educational needs context.

Through a child's individual education plan, the school and the education and library board are responsible for assessing the benefits of all interventions made for a child with special educational needs.

Tá tugtha le fios dom ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne nach bhfaigheann said aon chomhairle phrofisiúnta ná aon chomhairle liachta a thugann tacaíocht d'ionadú páistí aonair i dtimpeallacht oideachais stiúrtha.

I am advised by the education and library boards that they are not currently in receipt of any professional or medical advice which supports the placement of individual children in a conductive education environment.

The boards have assured the Department of Education that the needs of the significant number of children with cerebral palsy are successfully met in a range of grant-aided schools, including special schools and units attached to mainstream schools. Such placements are supported by a range of medical interventions and therapeutic support from medical professionals including orthopaedic specialists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech and language therapists. Professionals who have been involved in the assessment and intervention of children with specific cerebral palsy profiles provide advice, support and training both to parents and to

schools to maximise opportunities for social and educational inclusion. Consequently, children with cerebral palsy can be placed in a range of mainstream schools as well as special schools.

Children with Cerebral Palsy

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education if her Department plans to work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to ensure the Buddy Bear Trust Conductive Education School is adequately resourced to assist children with cerebral palsy. (AQW 1516/09)

The Minister of Education: A mechanism is already in place to allow education and library boards (ELBs) to fund a placement for any child with cerebral palsy who, on the professional advice of the health and social care trusts, requires such a placement to be made. The Buddy Bear School is an independent school which is approved by the Department of Education, under Article 26 of the Education (NI) Order 1996 (the 1996 Order), as suitable for the admission of children with special educational needs. The ELBs do not, therefore, have to seek the prior approval of the Department before placing a child in the school.

Mar sin de, níl sé i gceist ag an Roinn, plé a dhéanamh ar an Buddy Bear Independent School leis an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteacha Poiblí.

The Department, therefore, has no plans to discuss the funding of the Buddy Bear Independent School with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

DE does not provide any core funding directly to the independent school sector, but funding can follow individual children who are placed in an independent school. Should a board place a child with a statement of special educational needs in the Buddy Bear School, on receipt of professional medical advice from a health and social care trust, then the board—

- (a) shall pay the fees payable in respect of the education provided for the child at the school;
- (b) may pay any fees payable in respect of board and lodging provided for the child at the school; and
- (c) may provide transport for the child to facilitate his or her attendance at the school.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education when she will bring her Department's plans for post-primary transfer before the Assembly. (AQW 1536/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuireadh mo chuid tograí maidir le haistriú iarbhunscoile faoi bhráid an Fheidhmeannais ar an 15 Bealtaine 2008. Nuair a bheidh an Feidhmeannas críochnaithe le mo chuid tograí, tá sé mar aidhm agam dréacht-reachtaíocht a thabhairt os comhair an Tionóil le taca a chur faoi na socruithe nua.

My proposals for post-primary transfer were brought before the Executive on 15 May 2008. On completion of the Executive's engagement with my proposals I aim to bring before the Assembly draft legislation to underpin the new arrangements.

School Meals

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what her plans are regarding the provision of free school meals for children, in their first years at primary school. (AQW 1540/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl sé i gceist agam faoi láthair na socruithe atá ann anois a athrú agus béilí scoile saor in aisce a thabhairt isteach do gach páiste a thosaíonn ar an bhunscoil, mar a d'fhógair Rialtas na hAlban le déanaí.

I have no plans at present to change the existing arrangements and introduce free school meals for all children starting primary school as announced recently by the Scottish Government.

The provision of free school meals to pupils in years 1-3 here, assuming an uptake of 75% in line with the recent Scottish pilot, would cost in the region of £16 million on top of existing funding. This level of resources would be difficult to find in the present financial climate.

The Department does, however, recognise that a healthy, balanced diet is vital for children's growth and development, and for their long term health and well being. Nutritionally balanced school meals continue, therefore, to be provided free of charge to those children most in need. The Department is also making available additional funding of over £3 million per annum to ensure that the food content value of school meals is a minimum of 50p in nursery, primary and special schools and a minimum of 60p in post-primary schools.

Irish-Language Schools

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1190/09, how many pupils in Irish language schools are in receipt of free travel to school. (AQW 1555/09)

The Minister of Education: Is feidir liom a chur in iúl go raibh 767 dalta a fuair cuidiú iompair baile is scoile chuig Gaelscoileanna agus aonaid Ghaelscolaíochta sa bhliain 2007/08.

I can advise that in 2007/08 there were 767 pupils receiving home to school transport assistance to Irish-medium schools and units.

Junk Food

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what action schools are taking to alert children and parents to the dangers of eating junk food. (AQW 1591/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department recognises that a healthy, balanced diet is vital for children's growth and development, and for their long term health and well being. It has, therefore, been working with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to draw up a Food in Schools policy document which draws together the range of strategies and plans that are being put in place to deliver improved nutrition for our school children.

Tá sé mar aidhm ag an bheartas a chinntiú go gcuimsíonn bia scoile an cúig ghrúpa bia; go ndéanann sé cion tairbhe do chothú na hóige agus go ligeann sé do pháistí na scileanna riachtanacha agus an t-eolas riachtanach a fhorbairt le roghanna sláintiúla a dhéanamh ar scoil agus sa bhaile.

The policy aims to ensure that school food is representative of the five food groups; makes a significant contribution to childhood nutrition and enables children to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to make healthy food choices both at school and at home.

The Department, in conjunction with the Education and Library Boards and other school authorities, began to introduce compulsory nutritional standards for school meals to schools during the autumn 2005 term and they are now in place in all schools here. The initiative is also being extended to include other food in schools (vending machines, tuck shops, etc).

A whole school approach to food and nutrition involving teaching staff, catering staff, pupils, parents and the local community is essential if we are to address this issue effectively. In this connection the Department has been working with the Health Promotion Agency to produce good practice guidance to assist schools in adopting an effective approach to healthier eating and drinking and on a communications campaign to publicise the food in schools initiative. We are working to a January 2009 launch date.

On the broader front, the revised curriculum includes a requirement for all children to undertake Home Economics at Key Stage 3. This will provide

opportunities for young people to develop their understanding of a healthy diet and the hygienic and healthy use of foods in the preparation of meals. In addition, Personal Development is compulsory for all pupils from age 4 to 16 and provides opportunities for them to learn about their personal health including a healthy diet and understanding the contribution of food to growth, energy and health. Through this, children will continue to have opportunities to explore the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, including healthy eating.

High Court Ruling

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the overall financial effect of the High Court ruling against her Department on its modernisation framework tendering procedures; and in respect of this ruling (i) if it will lead to underspend by her Department in subsequent years; and (ii) how long it will impact on her Department's overall spending policy. (AQW 1592/09)

The Minister of Education: I ndiaidh rialaithe a rinne an Ard-Chúirt ar 3 Deireadh Fómhair ar agóid in aghaidh Creata na Roinne um Móroibreacha a Thabhairt i gcrích, tá measúnú á dhéanamh ar na himpleachtaí don chlár caipitil agus ar an bhuiséad faoi láthair agus go dtí go dtugtar an measúnú i gcrích, ní féidir liom tuairim a thabhairt ar an cheist ag an am seo.

Following the High Court ruling on 3 October on a challenge to the Department's Major Works Procurement Framework, the implications for the capital programme and budget are currently being assessed and until that assessment is completed, I cannot comment on the position at this stage.

High Court Ruling

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education (i) what are the legal, and additional, costs to her budget following the High Court ruling of the Schools Modernisation framework tendering procedures; (ii) what the timescale will be for re-tendering and re-assessment; and (iii) for how long will the Modernisation programme be delayed. (AQW 1594/09)

The Minister of Education: I ndiaidh rialaithe a rinne an Ard-Chúirt ar 3 Deireadh Fómhair ar agóid in aghaidh Creata na Roinne um Móroibreacha a Thabhairt i gcrích, tá measúnú á dhéanamh ar na himpleachtaí don chlár caipitil agus ar an bhuiséad faoi láthair agus go dtí go dtugtar an measúnú i gcrích, ní féidir liom tuairim a thabhairt ar an cheist ag an am seo.

Following the High Court ruling on 3 October on a challenge to the Department's Major Works

Procurement Framework, the implications for the capital programme and budget are currently being assessed and until that assessment is completed, I cannot comment on the position at this stage.

Pupils Using Wireless Technology

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what analysis her Department has made of potential safety implications for pupils using wireless technology (WiFi). (AQW 1617/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an Health Protection Agency (HPA) freagrach as sainchomhairle ar chosaint an duine ó chontúirtí radaíochta, lena n-áirítear nochtadh do réimsí leictreamaighneadacha.

The Health Protection Agency (HPA) has responsibility for providing expert advice on protecting people from radiation hazards, including exposure to electromagnetic fields. The Agency advises all local authorities, government departments and devolved administrations, and has consistently advised that it does not consider there to be any problems associated with the safety of wireless computer networks and sees no reason why WiFi should not continue to be used in schools. This is consistent with advice issued by other bodies such as the World Health Organisation and an Expert Group established and funded by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources in the south of Ireland.

The HPA announced in October 2007, that it will conduct a systematic programme of research over a period of two years which will include the investigation of levels of exposure from WiFi networks. The Agency has stated that it has good scientific reasons to expect the results of this research to be reassuring.

The advice given on wireless networks will be kept under constant review and the Department will monitor the progress of the HPA programme of research.

Schools Transfer Process

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to provide a list of schools that have indicated their intention, in the absence of an agreement, to put in place their own schools transfer process. (AQW 1618/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá na moltaí a rinne roinnt scoileanna gramadaí chun socrúithe measúnaithe a chur i bhfeidhm d'fhonn leanúint ar aghaidh le roghnú acadúil, tá siad á dtabhairt ar aghaidh go neamhspleách ar an Roinn Oideachais agus ar an Chomhairle Curaclaim, Scrúdúcháin agus

Mheasúnaithe. Mar sin de, níl baint ar bith ag an Roinn leis na moltaí seo.

The proposals by a number of grammar schools to put in place assessment arrangements in support of academic selection are being taken forward independently of the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. The Department therefore has no involvement in these proposals.

I am continuing with the pursuit of a legislative framework for my proposals which will render such arrangements unnecessary.

Schools Transfer Process

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail what powers she has to prevent schools, in the absence of an agreement, from putting in place their own schools transfer process. (AQW 1631/09)

The Minister of Education: Muna mbíonn comhaontú ann ar bhonn reachtach ar chritéir iontrála iarbhunskoile, ní bheidh aon reachtaíocht ann a shainíonn nó a thugann sonraíochtaí ar na critéir iontrála a mbaineann scoileanna úsáid astu.

If there is no agreement on a legislative basis for post-primary admissions criteria, then there will be no legislation defining or making specifications on the admissions criteria that schools can use. The Department will have a power to issue guidance on admissions to which schools must "have regard".

Pupils Using Wireless Technology

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education if her Department has received any concerns from (i) the public; (ii) teachers; or (iii) Board of Governors, relating to potential safety implications for pupils using wireless technology (WiFi). (AQW 1632/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá buarthaí faighte ag mo Roinn ó (i) bheirt dhaoine den phobal; (iii) ó Chathaoirleach amháin ar Bhord Gobharnóirí. Ní bhfuarthas aon bhuarthaí ó mhúinteoirí.

My Department has received concerns from (i) two members of the public; (iii) one Chairperson of a Board of Governors. There have been no concerns received from teachers.

Teacher to Pupil Ratio

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what the teacher to pupil ratio is. (AQW 1648/09)

The Minister of Education: Ba é an Cóimheas Daltaí le Múinteoirí (PTR) do scoileanna i dtuaisceart na hÉireann sa scoilbhliain 2007/08 ná 16.8.

The overall Pupil:Teacher Ratio (PTR) for the north of Ireland schools in 2007/08 was 16.8.

Transfer Criteria

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the measures she can take to prevent (a) schools within the Dickson Plan for Education area; and (b) all other schools, from operating transfer criteria with an academic element, in the absence of an agreed way forward; and (ii) the status of these measures. (AQW 1707/09)

The Minister of Education: Muna mbíonn comhaontú ar chritéir iontrála iarbhunscoile ar bhonn reachtach, ní bheidh aon reachtaíocht ann a shainíonn nó a thugann sonraíochtaí ar na critéir iontrála a mbaineann scoileanna úsáid astu.

If there is no agreement on a legislative basis for post-primary admissions criteria, then there will be no legislation defining or making specifications on the admissions criteria that schools can use. This applies equally to schools within the Dickson Plan and those that are not. In such circumstances the Department will exercise its power to issue guidance on admissions to which schools must “have regard”.

Academic Criterion

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 642/09, if she would confirm if any school, in the absence of an agreed way forward, will be legally permitted to add an academic criterion to the list of criteria outlined in her response. (AQW 1762/09)

The Minister of Education: Muna mbíonn comhaontú ar chritéir iontrála iarbhunscoile ar bhonn reachtach, ní bheidh aon reachtaíocht ann a shainíonn nó a thugann sonraíochtaí ar na critéir iontrála a mbaineann scoileanna úsáid astu.

If there is no agreement on a legislative basis for post-primary admissions criteria, then there will be no legislation defining or making specifications on the admissions criteria that schools can use.

Capital Programmes

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to list the capital programmes ready to go out to tender in the next month. (AQO 699/09)

The Minister of Education: I ndiaidh rialaithe a rinne an Ard-Chúirt le déanaí ar agóid in aghaidh Creata na Roinne um Móroibreacha a Thabhairt i gcrích, tá measúnú á dhéanamh ar mhórhionscadail caipitil faoi láthair agus go dtí go dtugtar é sin i gcrích, ní féidir liomsa tuairim a thabhairt ar chás na dtionscadal aonair ag an am seo.

Following a recent High Court ruling on a challenge to the Department’s Major Works Procurement Framework, the implications for major capital projects are currently being assessed and until that is completed I am unable to comment on the position of individual projects at this time.

Extended Schools Programme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education if she has secured additional funding for the Extended Schools Programme from the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQO 787/09)

The Minister of Education: Mar is eol daoibh thug mé an-tacaíocht do chlár na Scoileanna Sínithe. Tá lúcháir mhór orm lena raibh scoileanna ábalta a bhaint amach go dtí seo leis an sruth tiomnaithe maoinithe do ghníomhaíochtaí Scoileanna Sínithe.

As you know I have been highly supportive of the Extended Schools programme. I am delighted with what schools have been able to achieve so far with the dedicated funding stream for Extended School activities. The programme is already making a contribution to improving the quality of life for children and young people particularly from the most disadvantaged areas and I have received numerous thank you letters from school principals and pupils on restoring previous funding levels and widening the eligibility criteria.

A bid of £5 million for the Extended Schools Programme was submitted for consideration in the June monitoring round. This funding was not secured at that time and so the bid was re-submitted in the September monitoring round. Details of the outcome of this monitoring round are still awaited. However, I am hopeful of a successful outcome and I will continue to press for further funding in this area in future years.

Primary, post-primary and special schools are eligible for the programme if they draw 51% or more of their enrolment from a Neighbourhood Renewal Area or from the 30% lowest ranking wards in terms of multiple deprivation or educational disadvantage or if they have a Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) of 37% or higher

Nursery schools can be included if 37% or more of their pupils come from families who are entitled to free school meals and/or job seeker's allowance.

Schools are being allocated amounts between £5,500 and £48,000 depending on size and take up of the clustering incentive.

Where schools join in a cluster arrangement with other schools they will be entitled to additional funding to reflect their efforts in partnership working

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the implementation of the Education and Skills Authority. (AQO 739/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé de rún agam go fóill go mbeidh an tÚdarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna á fheidhmiú ón lú lá de mhí Aibreáin 2009.

It remains my intention that the Education and Skills Authority will be in operation from the 1st of April 2009.

However, the date for the formal establishment of the Education and Skills Authority depends on the progress of the legislation through the Assembly. I would not wish to pre-judge the length of time it will take my Executive colleagues, and indeed the Education Committee, to fully consider and debate the proposed Bills, but it remains my intention that the Authority will be established by April 2009 and my Department is working towards this date. Meanwhile, My Department, working closely with existing organisations, will press ahead with the convergence programme to reshape and transform existing services in preparation for the establishment of the ESA.

GCSE Financial Services

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why the GCSE course in financial services is being removed from the schools' curriculum. (AQO 684/09)

The Minister of Education: Is é CCEA a chuireann an GCSE i Seirbhísí Airgeadais ar fáil agus tá creidiúnú aige mar cháilíocht phiolótach laistigh den National Qualifications Framework ó mhí Mheán Fómhair 2003.

The Financial Services GCSE is offered by CCEA and has been accredited as a pilot qualification within the National Qualifications Framework since September 2003. As the qualification is currently offered on a pilot basis, its specification (syllabus) has to be subject to an evaluation by the regulatory arm of CCEA, with the views of teachers and students being

gathered to inform what should happen in June 2010 at the end of the pilot accreditation period.

Whilst teachers and pupils welcomed the specification, it was viewed as having a narrow content coverage for a GCSE subject. The evaluation also found that there was an overlap with existing GCSEs in Economics and Business Studies and to some degree Home Economics. Furthermore uptake was relatively low, with only 163 candidates taking the qualification in 2008.

As a result CCEA concluded that it would not continue to develop a GCSE in financial services.

Although the GCSE in financial services will no longer be available from September 2009, a range of other non-GCSE financial services qualifications are available at Levels 2 and 3 of the National Qualifications Framework. These include the Level 2 Diploma course 'Introduction to Financial Services'.

St Michael's College

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the announcement by St Michael's College, Enniskillen, that it plans to continue using academic selection. (AQO 800/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá a fhios agam nach mise féin a bhfuil iontas agus díoma orm go bhfuil sé socraithe ag St Michael's College bheith ag taobhú le scoileanna eile atá ag cur i gcoinne na leasuithe atá á moladh agam agus a bhfuil géarghá leo, leasuithe a thugann an seans is fearr chun córas seasmhach agus cothrom aistrithe iarbhunscoile bheith againn.

I know I am not alone in being both surprised and disappointed that St Michael's College should position itself alongside other schools that are opposed to the much needed reforms that I am proposing, reforms which offer the best prospect of a stable and equitable system of post-primary transfer.

Programme for International Student Assessment

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Education to report on the performance of schools in (i) Science; (ii) Mathematics; and (iii) English, as reported in the Programme for International Student Assessment published in December 2007, compared with those of non-selective school systems in (a) England; (b) Scotland; and (c) the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 780/09)

The Minister of Education: I dtaca le heolaíocht, matamaitic agus léitheoireacht de, tá feidhmíocht na scoileanna sa tuaisceart gar don mheánfeidhmíocht

OECD agus go ginearálta, ní bhíonn na difríochtaí idir scoir sa tuaisceart agus sna réigiúin eile suntasach ó thaobh staitisticí de.

In science, maths and reading, the performance of schools in the north is near the OECD average and the differences in scores with the other regions are generally not statistically significant. The exceptions are in Mathematics, where performance in Scotland is higher; and in Reading, where performance in the south of Ireland is higher. The actual scores are shown in the table below.

Science	Mean Score
North of Ireland	508
England	516
Scotland	515
South of Ireland	508
OECD mean score	500

Mathematics	Mean Score
North of Ireland	494
England	495
Scotland	506
South of Ireland	501
OECD mean score	498

Reading	Mean Score
North of Ireland	495
England	496
Scotland	499
South of Ireland	517
OECD mean score	492

Mean scores relate to each country as a whole. Non-selective schools in England and the North of Ireland cannot be reported separately.

Primary Schools

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools in urban areas currently have (i) more than; and (ii) fewer than, 140 pupils.
(AQO 756/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an freagra le fáil sa tábla a leanas.

The answer is contained in the table below.

No. of pupils	Number of schools Enrolment Year 1 - 7
Fewer than 140	89
140 or more	294
Total	383

Source: Annual school census 2007/08

Note: Urban schools are those within settlements with a population of 4,500 or more.

Entrance Examinations

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education, given that admission to schools is free, what the implications of this are for those who wish to charge for entrance examinations.
(AQO 749/09)

The Minister of Education: Faoi na tograí a chuir roinnt scoileanna gramadaí chun cinn, más rud é go gcaithfidh roinnt tuismitheoirí airgead a íoc d'fhonn go mbeadh a bpáiste ábalta iarrtas a dhéanamh ar an scoil, tréiseoidh sé sin an éagothroime atá rísholéir sa chóras reatha.

If, under the proposals put forward by a number of grammar schools, some parents are required to pay in order for their child to be able to apply to a school, that will reinforce the inequality that is evident in the current system, whereby affluent families sometimes pay for their children to be coached before they sit the transfer test.

I have brought proposals to the Executive which have equality at their heart. If my proposals achieve a legislative framework, there will be no question of any school charging parents in relation to post-primary transfer.

Independent Admissions Tests

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the impact that legal challenges taken by parents against schools operating independent admissions tests may have on school budgets.
(AQO 773/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní chreidim féin go bhfuil tuiscint mhaith ag scoileanna atá ag brath ar thús a chur leis an réim gníomhaíochta seo ar na priacail a bhaineann léi.

I do not believe that schools intending to embark on this course of action truly understand the risks involved. If judicial challenge exposes flaws in their procedures, the implications could be wide-ranging, and not just in terms of school budgets being drained in the defence of legal actions. If court rulings result in already oversubscribed schools being required

to admit additional pupils, this will also impact on the budgets of undersubscribed schools denied the admission of those pupils.

School Leavers

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to improve the education attainment of school leavers from ethnic minorities. (AQO 797/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá comhionannas, ardú ar chaighdeán, agus soláthar ardchaighdeán oideachais ina ngnéithe lárnacha de straitéis fhoriomlán mo Roinne.

Equality, the raising of standards, and the provision of a high quality education are core elements of the overall strategy of my Department. Through a consistent and transparent approach to school improvement we can make sure that no child gets left behind, and that every young person, regardless of social background, race or gender, has equal opportunity to succeed.

Too often, the ones most let down are young people who are already contending with barriers to education, for example those from poorer backgrounds, Traveller children, young people with special educational needs or disabilities, those from minority ethnic groups, particularly those whose first language is not English or Irish.

As part of its contribution to the improvement agenda my Department is currently in the process of finalising two complementary policies: The first, a revised policy on school improvement has been developed following discussions with teachers and young people about what, for them, drives school improvement and characterises a good school. The policy sets out how we plan to deliver improvement at every level in our education system – and explains the interventions that will be taken where evidence suggests that things can be improved. Second is the revised literacy and numeracy strategy which aims to tackle the numbers of children who struggle with reading, writing and using mathematics and those who leave school still lacking in skills and confidence in these areas.

My Department is also finalising a policy on supporting newcomer pupils in our schools. In addition to this, the regional Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS), which is provided by the Education and Library Boards and is funded by my Department, is strengthening and improving support for all newcomer pupils, their parents and teaching staff, primarily working through schools. A number of support services have already been established to do this, such as interpreting, translating, a multi-lingual website and diversity coordinators in cluster groups of schools.

In bringing forward this wide range of policies my Department will support every child in reaching his or her potential.

Irish Language

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Education if the Review of Irish Medium Education takes into account her Department's statutory obligations to facilitate and promote the Irish language. (AQO 767/09)

The Minister of Education: Mar chuid den Athbhreithniú ar Ghaelscolaíocht a eisíodh le haghaidh comhairliúcháin ar an 11ú de mhí Dheireadh Fómhair cuirtear san áireamh an dualgas reachtúil atá ar an Roinn Oideachais le forbairt na Gaelscolaíochta a spreagadh agus a éascú.

The Review of Irish Medium Education which was issued for consultation on 11 October takes account of the statutory duty placed on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish medium education. It also took account of the responsibilities placed on my Department by the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

This Review addresses the many issues facing the sector. The recommendations contained in it set out proposals for the continued development of a network of vibrant sustainable Irish language schools at all levels from preschool through to post primary. The Review will provide the foundations on which my Department will take forward the growth of the sector in a planned, strategic and sustainable way.

School Careers Advisers

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education if schools careers advisers provide adequate information about university and college choices in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 771/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá iarbhunscoileanna freagrach as oideachas faoi ghairmeacha a sholáthar agus tugann Séirbhís Gairmeacha na Roinne Fostaíochta agus Foghlama tacaíocht dóibh agus Clár éifeachtach Oideachais, Eolais, Comhairle agus Treorach a sholáthar acu.

Post primary schools are responsible for the delivery of careers education and they are supported in the delivery of an effective Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Programme, by the Department for Employment and Learning's Careers Service. The Careers Service is staffed by professionally qualified advisers who provide up to date careers information, and impartial advice and guidance. That information and advice includes details of college and

university opportunities available in the south and is also available through the Careers Service website.

Careers teachers also ensure that pupils are made aware of the availability of university and college places in the south and provide pupils with access to resources relating to these institutions and to the processes through which they can apply for places.

Primary Schools

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools in rural areas currently have (i) more than; and (ii) fewer than, 105 pupils. (AQO 727/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an freagra le fáil sa tábla thíos.

The answer is contained in the table below.

No. of pupils	Number of schools	
	Enrolment Year 1 - 7	Total enrolment
Fewer than 105	294	287
105 or more	208	215
Total	502	502

Source: Annual school census 2007/08

Note: Urban schools are those outside settlements with a population of 4,500 or more..

Integrated Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for the review of the viability criteria for integrated schools. (AQO 799/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá obair leanúnach fós á déanamh ó thaobh chur chun cinn an athbhreithniithe seo de.

Work is still ongoing in considering how to take forward this review. I can assure you that my officials will consult with interested parties about any possible change to the existing viability criteria, and any changes will be in the context of existing policy and legislation.'

Educational Psychologist

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale for assessment by an educational psychologist, from referral to assessment. (AQO 712/09)

The Minister of Education: Maidir le ceanglais reachtúla, ag Céim 4 den Chód Cleachtais, déanann an Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne breithniú ar an riachtanas i gcomhair measúnaithe reachtúil ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais agus beidh measúnú ó shíceolaí oideachais san áireamh leis.

In terms of statutory requirements, at Stage 4 of the Code of Practice, the Education and Library Board considers the need for a statutory assessment of special educational needs which will include an assessment by an educational psychologist. Boards have 16 weeks from the date that the Board notifies the parents that it is considering making an assessment or from the date that the request to carry out an assessment is received by the Board from the parent or the school to complete the assessment.

In terms of non-statutory assessments, I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the average waiting time for such assessments by an educational psychologist, at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, is as follows:-

- Belfast Education and Library Board – 66 days
- North-Eastern Education and Library Board – 109 days
- South-Eastern Education and Library Board – 158 days
- Southern Education and Library Board – 56 days
- Western Education and Library Board – no waiting list

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many staff are employed in his Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1291/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): There are 7 staff employed in my Departmental Private Office, including the Special Adviser.

In the 2007-08 Financial Year, the cost of employing these staff was £192,366.70. In the 2008-09 Financial Year, the cost to the end of September was £109,136.72.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the annual cost to maintain his Departmental website. (AQW 1329/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning's website is managed by the Internet Manager (Staff Officer) and an Assistant Internet Manager (Executive Officer II) as one element of their overall responsibilities. Content managers/authors within each directorate/branch maintain their own pages on the website. Only a small percentage of their time is dedicated to this activity and it is not possible to identify the staff costs involved in this specific role.

As with other NICS websites, the Department for Employment and Learning's site is hosted by Delivery and Innovation Division (DID), Department of Finance and Personnel and costs are not available for individual departmental websites. The average annual maintenance and development cost, based on the period 2006-2008, of various templates that are used throughout the site is £4651 with the DEL site generating an average of over 200,000 page views per month.

In addition, it costs the department £71.00 a year to renew the domain names for the departmental website www.delni.gov.uk.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what funding is available from his Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1348/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not currently provide any funding to Home Start and, based on the role of that organisation in relation to young children and their parents, has no remit to do so. Where appropriate, the Department for Employment and Learning engages with third party organisations, including those in the community and voluntary sector, through means of contracts for the delivery of specific services let following a public procurement process.

STEM Subjects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students graduated in the STEM subjects from local universities, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1405/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of students who gained qualifications in STEM subjects from Northern Ireland Higher

Education Institutions in each of the last 5 years are detailed in the table below:

2002/03	3,130
2003/04	2,925
2004/05	2,845
2005/06	2,855
2006/07	2,855

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Note: STEM subjects are Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, Computer Science and Engineering & Technology. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

International Students

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will outline the number of international students in each campus of Queens University and the University of Ulster. (AQW 1419/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of international students studying at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and each campus of the University of Ulster (UU) in 2006/07 is detailed in the table below:

Institution / Campus	Enrolments
QUB	2,290
UU – Belfast	105
UU - Coleraine	990
UU – Jordanstown	1,115
UU – Magee	765

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Note: International students are those students whose permanent residence was outside the United Kingdom before entering a NI Higher Education Institution. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of out centres being operated by Belfast Metropolitan College; and what plans his Department has to expand or reduce the facilities, in each Belfast constituency. (AQW 1480/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Belfast Metropolitan College delivers the majority of its business from six major campuses which are owned by the College. It also delivers a range of courses from 61 out centres; 11 in North Belfast, 15 in South Belfast, 17 in East Belfast and 18 in West

Belfast. The college has confirmed that they have no immediate plans to expand or reduce this provision.

Steps to Work Programme

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if TWL and other training organisations fulfilled all the tender/contract requirements in respect of Steps 2 Work contracts at 28 September 2008, including any proposed partnership/sub-contracting arrangements. (AQO 708/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Eight contracts for the Steps to Work Programme were awarded on 17th September 2008 in eight contract areas where contract conditions were met, including conditions relating to sub-contracting arrangements. In two contract areas contract conditions were not met and the procurement process is on-going in these areas.

Department Projects

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the total funding that has been spent by his Department on projects in the Upper Bann constituency in the last 12 months. (AQO 709/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning has spent a total of approximately £615,000 on projects in the Upper Bann constituency in the last 12 months. This does not include money provided through the recurrent grant to the college or to training organisations contracted to deliver under Training for Success or similar programmes.

St Mary's University College

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the funding to St Mary's University College in the 2008-09 academic year is higher than the funding awarded for the previous academic year. (AQO 736/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The recurrent grant provision for St Mary's College in Academic Year 2008/09 is £5,210,358 which represents a 2.6% increase on Academic Year 2007/08. When funding for initiatives such as widening participation, and conversion funding, is included, the actual increase is 3.5% on Academic Year 2007/08.

University of Ulster

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if, under the formulae funding model based

on student numbers, any consideration can be given to University of Ulster's multiple campus structure. (AQO 804/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Northern Ireland universities' block grant allocation is calculated in accordance with a formulae funding model developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The model does not make special provision for any institutions with a multiple campus structure.

STEM Review

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made towards completing the Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) review. (AQO 740/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with the Department of Education, has initiated a review of Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in schools and Further Education colleges for industry under the Chairmanship of Dr Hugh Cormican. I understand that the work is in its final stage and it is anticipated that the report will be with the Minister of Education and myself before Christmas 2008.

Universities Ireland

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the level of co-operation between universities and third level institutions which fall under the remit of Universities Ireland. (AQO 808/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

There are nine universities which fall under the remit of Universities Ireland, including Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster. The scope of collaboration is extensive and covers both education and research activity. Examples include biomedical sciences and informatics; technology assessment and evaluation; joint marketing of technology to industry; innovation; sharing expertise, best practice and training.

Proposed Merger

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has received a business case on the proposed merger of Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis University College. (AQO 733/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have not yet received a business case on the proposed

merger of Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis University College.

Further Education College Boards

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what meetings he has had with the Chairpersons of the Further Education College Boards during the last 12 months. (AQO 734/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have had two meetings with the Chairpersons of the Further Education Colleges within the last 12 months.

University Funding

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the reasons for changes being made by his Department to the funding formula and student numbers proposed for Stranmillis University College and St. Mary's University College; and what impact these changes will have on the future of teacher training provision. (AQO 695/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Prior to academic year 2008/09, the methodology used to fund the University Colleges was not linked to the number of students actually enrolled and contained an anomaly whereby more grant could be generated as student numbers fell.

This situation could not be maintained in light of declining Initial Teacher Education (ITE) intake numbers as determined by the Department of Education. The number for students who are not following teacher education courses are set by my Department but at a level which recognises that the principal business of the colleges remains that of teacher training.

The provision of teacher education is a matter for the Department of Education and I believe the move to a funding model based on student numbers will provide much greater clarity for all stakeholders in relation to how the overall provision is funded.

European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department is taking to implement the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages. (AQO 791/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has in place a range of measures to facilitate the conduct of business in Irish and Ulster Scots. They include the translation of a number of

key documents and information leaflets which are made available via its website and has in place a Code of Courtesy for staff. Also, courses to further the language and culture of both traditions are on offer in FE and HE Institutions.

University of Ulster

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has received any recent information from the University of Ulster in relation to proposals to increase student numbers and further develop the Magee campus. (AQO 693/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has not received any recent information from the University of Ulster in relation to proposals to increase student numbers and further develop its Magee campus.

Construction Industry

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures have been put in place to support the increasing number of people unemployed in the construction industry; and what plans he has to re-train and re-skill people for alternative employment opportunities. (AQO 711/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The construction industry in Northern Ireland is currently facing a downturn, particularly in the housing market. Nevertheless, the Department will continue to fund training in construction occupations to support the industry according to need highlighted with the Sector Skills Council.

Under the Pre-Apprenticeship component of Training for Success, eligible apprentices who have been made redundant can continue to undertake Level 2 skills training and qualifications in construction. Alternatively, they can undertake skills training and qualifications in a different occupational area, if they so choose.

I am currently considering how to support apprentices at level 3 who have been made redundant.

A comprehensive range of services is also available through the Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres, as well as 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.

Furthermore, the Department's Careers Service provides an all-age, impartial careers information, advice and guidance service throughout Northern Ireland. This service is available to all clients making careers decisions, including those facing redundancy within the construction industry. These clients may also avail of the services provided by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults which is funded by the Department.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

London 2012 Olympics

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what initiatives are being undertaken by her Department to encourage firms to take advantage of potential business opportunities arising from the London 2012 Olympics. (AQW 1263/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Invest NI has undertaken a number of activities with companies in Northern Ireland to promote business opportunities arising from the 2012 Olympics. These have included E-Zines, conferences and information seminars relating to the 2012 build programme. In addition, companies have also been given guidance on how to register on CompeteFor.com, the official web portal for business opportunities relating to 2012. To date over 460 Northern Ireland companies have registered with CompeteFor. Further workshops on professional tendering and quality management systems are due to be held by the end of November, and consultants have been engaged to provide advice and guidance to companies who are bidding for 2012 work.

Caridian BCT Plant

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how much public money Invest NI is investing in the Caridian BCT plant at Millbrook, Larne as part of its recent expansion; and (ii) how much will be funded by the European Regional Development Fund. (AQW 1282/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On 18th September 2008, I announced a £16,000,000 investment from Caridian BCT to expand its facility in Larne.

This investment included £1,762,500 support from Invest NI of which £235,000 was from the European Regional Development Fund.

Caridian BCT Plant

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people are currently employed at the Caridian BCT plant at Millbrook, Larne. (AQW 1283/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Caridian BCT currently employs around 190 people at its Larne facility.

Caridian BCT Plant

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many extra jobs will be created as a result of the recent investment in the Caridian BCT plant in Larne. (AQW 1284/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On 18th September 2008, I announced that Caridian BCT intended to invest a further £16,000,000 in its Larne facility. This investment will promote an additional 235 new jobs and generate almost £5,000,000 for the local economy in wages and salaries.

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many staff are employed in her Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1340/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Seven staff are currently employed in the DETI Private Office. The annual costs were as follows:

- April 2007 to March 2008 - £247,111.67
- April 2008 to Sept 2008 - £134,086.23

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what funding is available from her Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1354/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its NDPBs have no remit to provide funding for Home Start.

Visitors to Northern Ireland

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many visitors there was

from (i) Great Britain; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland, in each of the last 5 years; and the estimated spend these visitors generated. (AQW 1404/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The number of visitors from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, in each of the last 5 years; and the estimated spend these visitors generated is detailed below:

GREAT BRITAIN

	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003
Number of visitors:	1,285,000	1,281,000	1,308,000	1,408,000	1,379,000
Expenditure:	£219m	£241m	£250m	£231m	£216m

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003
Number of visitors:	322,000	277,000	271,000	252,000	223,000
Expenditure:	£43m	£32m	£30m	£24m	£22m

Titanic Signature Project

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how she intends to include aspects of the Andrews family roots and heritage in Comber, in the future development of the Titanic Signature Project. (AQW 1407/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has identified a number of heritage assets in and around Comber in a recent Titanic product audit, and the Comber Historical Society has researched and produced the Comber Circuit, a self-guided walking tour which includes all the key sites.

However, many of the potential attractions in Comber are not accessible to the public and may only be viewed from the roadside. Early discussions have taken place with many of the managers/owners of sites and properties and I hope that it may be possible to permit access to groups by appointment in the future.

The Comber Circuit and the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church and graveyard will feature in a new Titanic guide which is currently being produced by the Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau. This guide will primarily promote Titanic tours and key attractions which are open to the public. It will also highlight those landmark buildings with Titanic

and Andrews family associations such as the Ulster Reform Club and the Royal Belfast Academical Institution.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if market research has been considered to identify the potential negative effect the current economic climate may have on NITB's corporate priorities 'Top 10 List'. (AQW 1420/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: No specific market research to measure the impact of the current economic climate has been undertaken. It is clear, nevertheless, that factors such as the tightening of consumer lending, and the rising cost of living are likely to reduce disposable income and weaken consumer confidence. This in turn may lead to changing consumer patterns and preferences in the short term. On the other hand, exchange rates are having a positive impact, with the strength of the Euro increasing the value for money and affordability offered by the UK. This provides a short term competitive advantage in terms of European and Republic of Ireland markets. NITB will continue to focus on the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland markets with increased focus on the day trip and group markets.

The strategic direction as identified in NITB's Corporate Plan thus remains. NITB will continue to focus on the delivery of key Corporate Plan priorities to ensure the development of a long term sustainable tourism industry for Northern Ireland. Tactical adjustments in response to economic conditions will allow for flexibility in the short term, including targeting the closer to home markets to maximise the competitive advantage of the Euro.

Tourist Numbers

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact the downturn in the American economy will have on the projected (i) number of international tourists that will visit; and (ii) revenue that will be generated, for the period 2008-10. (AQW 1422/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland attracted almost 1.8 million overseas visitors in 2007 - an additional 83,000 compared to 2006 - and generated £334 million in overseas tourist receipts. The number of visitors from North America last year increased by +13% on 2006.

The Tourism Ireland Corporate Plan, 2008-2010, outlines a series of targets for Visitors to Northern

Ireland and the revenues generated by these visitors. The plan also details targets for Promotable Visitors, of which overseas tourists comprise more than nine tenths. These targets are reproduced in the table below:

	2006	2007	2010 Target
Visitors (000)	1,702	1,785	1,999 - 2,050
Revenue (£m)	338	334	444 - 458
Promotable Visitors (000)	292	382	379 - 396

These targets were generated in the autumn of 2007 and the outlook for global tourism has deteriorated very sharply since then. The downturn in the economy of the United States during the current year is clearly impacting the affordability of overseas travel for many American consumers. The latest US Department of Commerce figures for June show a 5.3% drop in US visits to Europe for the fourth consecutive month of decline.

This situation is exacerbated by the weakness of the US dollar and increased fuel costs which, in particular, has impacted on air travel and services. In addition, consumer sentiment, a known driver of demand for overseas tourism, and all measures of confidence amongst American consumers have witnessed a sharp decline.

Initial reports for the first half of 2008 suggest that visitor numbers to Northern Ireland from North America continued to show growth. However, there have been a number of high profile losses of air capacity since then, which are expected to impact on visitor levels, particularly from Canada, for the second half of the year and beyond.

Revenue that will be generated is impacted by the visitor numbers, average daily spend per visitor and length of stay all of which are expected to be impacted by the turbulence and uncertainty in the North American market. Anecdotal reports also suggest that North American visitors, who do travel this year, have been trading down in terms of the packages they buy and their out of pocket spend once here.

We will wait and see the impact of the recent US Government financial intervention on the broader economy. It is likely that any upturn in the US economy would lead to a pick-up in international travel due to pent-up demand.

Tourism Ireland's strategy is to maintain its promotional presence in major markets, including North America, during this period, to ensure that Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, is well positioned for recovery when consumer confidence resumes. Experience shows that maintaining a strong marketing presence during uncertain times, pays dividend. By 2007, Northern Ireland and the

Republic of Ireland were among only a few Western European destinations to have recovered fully from the downturn in travel which followed the 9/11 attacks.

Solarteur School

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will investigate the establishment of a solarteur school, in co-operation with the Republic of Ireland, to provide training in renewable energy technologies. (AQW 1482/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has no plans to investigate the establishment of a solarteur school. Training in renewable energy technologies in co-operation with the Republic of Ireland is currently supported through the Renewable Energy Installer Academy, an Interreg project supported by DETI. In addition, the UK Micro-generation Certification Scheme offers an additional route to certification of installer competence.

Public-Sector Jobs

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a breakdown of the current number of public-sector jobs as a percentage of the working age population, in each District Council area. (AQW 1575/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Estimates of the total number of public-sector employee jobs by District Council Area are only available from the Census of Employment on a biennial basis and the most up-to-date figures relate to September 2005. The number of public-sector employee jobs, the working age population and the number of public-sector jobs, as a percentage of the working age population for each District Council Area, can be found in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PUBLIC-SECTOR EMPLOYEE JOBS AT SEPTEMBER 2005, WORKING AGE POPULATION (MID-YEAR 2005) AND NUMBER OF PUBLIC-SECTOR JOBS AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE WORKING AGE POPULATION FOR EACH DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

District Council Area	Public-Sector Employee Jobs at September 2005	Mid-year Working Age Population 2005	Public-Sector Jobs as a percentage of the Working Age Population
Antrim	9,448	31,700	30%
Ards	5,100	46,800	11%

District Council Area	Public-Sector Employee Jobs at September 2005	Mid-year Working Age Population 2005	Public-Sector Jobs as a percentage of the Working Age Population
Armagh	7,172	33,700	21%
Ballymena	7,556	37,000	20%
Ballymoney	2,077	17,500	12%
Banbridge	3,048	28,000	11%
Belfast	68,889	166,500	41%
Carrickfergus	2,442	24,300	10%
Castlereagh	11,784	39,300	30%
Coleraine	6,621	34,200	19%
Cookstown	1,967	21,000	9%
Craigavon	10,338	52,300	20%
Londonderry	14,721	67,300	22%
Down	6,162	41,400	15%
Dungannon	4,728	31,100	15%
Fermanagh	5,416	36,800	15%
Larne	1,948	19,100	10%
Limavady	2,867	21,800	13%
Lisburn	10,947	68,900	16%
Magherafelt	3,710	26,000	14%
Moyle	1,181	9,900	12%
Newry & Mourne	8,940	55,600	16%
Newtownabbey	6,518	49,700	13%
North Down	6,062	48,100	13%
Omagh	7,439	31,700	23%
Strabane	2,322	23,800	10%
Northern Ireland	219,403	1,063,600	21%

Source: Census of Employment, DETI; Mid-year Population estimates, DFP

New Bio-Energy Project

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she has taken to encourage the major new bio-energy project to be located in Derry/Londonderry.

(AQO 698/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

It is not clear from the Member's question which specific new bio-energy plant he is referring to. My Department is aware of a number of potential bio-energy plants which may be located in County Londonderry.

In terms of encouragement for such plants, if they generate electricity and are accredited under the Renewables Obligation, or NIRO, they will be eligible to receive support in the form of Renewables Obligation Certificates, known as ROCs. These ROCs are issued for each megawatt-hour of generation and currently trade at around £50. My Department is currently consulting on proposed changes to the NIRO to provide enhanced support for certain forms of generation, including some bio-energy plants.

Additionally I am also aware that a number of potential developers of bio-energy plants recently took part in a renewable energy study tour, organised by Invest NI, which examined some new and emerging technologies in Austria. I hope there will be lessons for Northern Ireland from that trip.

Social Economy Network

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance the Social Economy Network has provided to healthcare provision, particularly for the young and the elderly.

(AQO 689/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Social Economy Network (NI) Ltd was established in 2006 to act as the voice of the social economy sector in Northern Ireland. The Social Economy Network is a membership based organisation and its aims are to increase and develop the membership; ensure equal access to quality development support for the sector; represent the views of the sector and promote the work of the sector widely in Northern Ireland.

I understand that approx 20% of the current membership is made up of social economy enterprises engaged in the provision of health and social care services to the young and the elderly.

I recognise the important role that the Social Economy Network has to play in promoting the products and services available from its social economy enterprise members and in articulating the needs of the sector to Government.

The development of a strong and sustainable Social Economy Network is a key element in Government's strategy to develop the sector in Northern Ireland. My department currently supports the development of the

Network with a grant totalling £600,000 for the 4 year period up to 2011.

Hotel and Accommodation Capacity

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the existing hotel and accommodation capacity will meet the expected increase of tourists. (AQO 690/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A recent NITB report assessed future tourism growth potential to 2018, based on the realisation of priority tourism development projects, including the 5 Signature Projects. The report indicates that the current total hotel capacity across Northern Ireland will not be sufficient to meet this potential demand.

In September my Department commenced a strategic review of the wider accommodation needs in this context. Upon completion, this review, based on recent trends, future growth assessments and potential accommodation developments currently in the planning cycle, will allow us to make an informed regional assessment of needs going forward. It is intended that the review will be completed by the end of this year.

Energy Generation

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of co-operation between her Department, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ulster Farmer's Union in relation to (i) the potential for energy generation from wind farms in rural areas; and (ii) energy savings from improved efficiencies in farming practices. (AQO 691/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My department and DARD co-operate well together, both informally on a day-to-day basis on issues of shared concern, and in the more formal structures of the DETI-led Inter-departmental Group on Bioenergy as well as in DARD's Agricultural Stakeholders Forum on Renewable Energy. While both departments meet representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union, there is no formal mechanism for co-operation on the specific issues named.

I understand that DARD has specifically consulted the Ulster Farmers' Union on the "Increased Energy Efficiency" priority investment area of the Farm Modernisation Programme. In preparing this programme DARD consulted DETI to ensure complementarity of activity.

Broadband Provision

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she has taken to ensure the continuation of broadband provision in rural areas. (AQO 724/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: When the contract that my Department has with BT for 100% broadband coverage comes to an end on 31 March 2009, more than 99.5% of the population will continue to access broadband services via telephone lines. Those currently accessing broadband services via a satellite product live in remote rural areas where the distance from the nearest telephone exchange means that a fixed-line broadband solution is not possible. For these customers a change in service will be required. However, I am determined that Northern Ireland will continue to benefit from 100% broadband coverage, at an equitable price. Therefore my Department has already started the process to put in place a further 3 year contract for the delivery of broadband to these remote areas. This will be in place ahead of March 2009. Satellite customers should already be aware of this forthcoming change and have been asked to register with the Department if they wish to avail of the new service.

Over the next 3 years, with developments in the telecommunications market and technologies, I would hope that a more permanent solution for rural areas will emerge.

Financial Services Sector

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what she is doing to encourage the development of a financial services sector. (AQO 685/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland value proposition consists of well educated and skilled people, in a cost-competitive, pro-business operating environment, this continues to be compelling and is being delivered through direct company contact and marketing initiatives in key cities such as New York, London and Dublin.

During July 2008, this work by Invest NI saw the fourth strategic investment by Citi since 2004. The investment in the corporation's Centre of Excellence in Belfast will promote 145 new operations posts, bringing total Citi employment in Belfast to 861. These jobs attract average salaries of around £25k, well in excess of the Northern Ireland private sector median.

Despite the recent turbulence in the global financial markets, Invest NI continues to build relationships and target companies in this sector, with a view to future

investments. Attracting new investment remains a priority to develop and grow the sector and build on successes to date from Abbey, Citi, Allstate and NYSE.

Reducing Energy Costs

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what implications the global economic downturn will have on the Programme for Government's target of reducing energy costs relative to United Kingdom and EU regions by 2011.
(AQO 715/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The global economic downturn may result in reduced demand for fossil fuels and this may, in time, impact on gas and electricity retail prices. Any price reduction would, of course, apply to all regions of the United Kingdom and Europe. It would, therefore, be unlikely to have any direct bearing on the differential between prices in Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and the EU regions.

Public Procurement Contracts

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps her Department is taking to ensure that local SMEs and Social Economy Enterprises are able to compete with larger companies when tenders are put out for public procurement contracts in services, supplies and works.
(AQO 754/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI and Invest NI work closely with small businesses to increase their competitiveness and ability to trade profitably in export markets. An important aspect of this work includes enabling client companies, particularly SMEs and social enterprises, to maximise and exploit the significant tendering opportunities available from public procurement contracts.

Each year, Invest NI runs a series of tendering workshops designed to increase the skills of their client companies in tender preparation and, more importantly, to provide details of sources of tendering information. The agency also operates a Tenders Alert Service, open to all SMEs in Northern Ireland, which alerts companies to all relevant tenders appearing in the Official Journal of the European Union. This service is complemented by a further service which alerts subscribers to sub-threshold tenders originating on the island of Ireland. In the year ending 31 March 2008, almost 300 companies used this service to

secure new business amounting to approximately £264 million.

Work by DETI and Invest NI is currently underway to develop an Enterprise Strategy for Northern Ireland. Public procurement opportunities for SMEs and Social Enterprises have been identified as an issue that the Strategy should seek to address. Officials from my Department are engaging with DFP's Central Procurement Directorate to identify any scope for actions that would encourage greater participation by SMEs and Social Enterprises in public procurement. This includes working together to facilitate a Social Economy Enterprise Procurement Group to help build and increase capacity and capability to tender within the sector, to increase awareness of the tendering process and to break down barriers to procurement.

Ethical Standards Policy

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has an ethical standards policy on developing trade relations between Northern Ireland and countries which do not adhere to international democratic standards.
(AQO 778/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In planning and mounting its overseas trade programmes, Invest NI conforms fully to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's guidance on the appropriateness and safety of developing trade links with certain countries.

For example, the UK Government actively encourages trade with high-growth, emerging markets around the world. However, under current Foreign and Commonwealth Office guidance, trade is discouraged or prohibited with a number of countries that do not conform to internationally-recognised standards.

Tourism

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to encourage more tourists to visit.
(AQO 779/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: NITB

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) overarching responsibility is for the development, promotion and marketing of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

NITB undertakes a year round calendar of activity to promote Northern Ireland to both the domestic and Republic of Ireland markets through a series of marketing campaigns and PR.

It has recently launched an autumn campaign in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland markets which will run to the Christmas period and which includes press advertising, web promotion, radio, outdoor, direct mail and PR.

As well as the promotional activity, NITB's draft Corporate Plan identifies cities, culture and heritage, sports tourism activities and waterways and business tourism product portfolios. There will be an opportunity for bodies to bid for delivery of elements from within these product portfolios to address the provision of unique Northern Ireland product to sell within the marketplace.

Through the EU Competitiveness and Innovation Funding, NITB will administer a Tourism Innovation Fund to be put out to open call in autumn of this year. Work is also continuing on the development of the five signature projects.

Tourism Ireland

In 2007, Northern Ireland attracted almost 1.8 million overseas visitors - an additional 83,000 compared to 2006 and an increase of 4.9%. Particularly welcome also was the very substantial growth in Holidaymakers from all market areas including Great Britain (+34%), North America (+25%), Mainland Europe (+42%) and Other Areas (+10%).

Tourism Ireland features Northern Ireland prominently across all markets in its extensive destination marketing programme. In addition, it carries out specific campaigns and activities focusing exclusively on Northern Ireland, particularly in Great Britain and in markets with direct access services. The aim is to raise awareness of, and interest in, Northern Ireland as a holiday destination by focusing on the diversity of things to see and do, on Signature Projects and Winning Themes.

Tourism Ireland concentrates its Northern Ireland-specific promotional activities around direct access gateways and works closely with carriers and other industry partners to deliver compelling messages including ease of access, good value fares and inclusive packages, as well as showcasing a range of compelling offers from local industry.

Given the current global economic uncertainty and pressure on consumer confidence in key markets, there is no doubt that the tourism industry faces challenging times ahead. However, I am confident that Tourism Ireland, working in close partnership with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the industry, has the right strategy in place to promote Northern Ireland to best effect in the coming months and years.

Assistance for Companies

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what actions she is taking to assist companies in the current economic difficulties.
(AQO 682/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

In response to current economic circumstances, Invest NI has developed a programme of actions and initiatives designed to help businesses 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.

Invest NI held two awareness seminars at the end of September, in Belfast and Cookstown, offering practical specialist advice to businesses. At the Belfast event I announced a £5 million Accelerated Support Fund offering fast track advice and assistance to businesses whose competitiveness is being impacted by the current economic circumstances.

This includes, for example, up to five days free on-site diagnostic support to those Invest NI clients with an identified urgent business need with the objective of developing remedial actions.

In all, 152 businesses attended these events and feedback was extremely positive. Invest NI will follow these events with a series of similar events across its Regional Office Network.

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. We have 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 take advantage of the market condition by marketing Northern Ireland as a cost competitive location for investment prospects which are driven by cost reduction or are seeking to position themselves in preparation for the situation improving.

Invest NI

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the terms of reference for the independent review of the workings of Invest NI will include how investment opportunities can be used to tackle disadvantage and need.
(AQO 755/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The main aim of the review is to ensure

that DETI and Invest NI policies and programmes are targeted to help achieve the goals outlined in the Programme for Government. As part of this, the review will consider the sub-regional distribution of inward investment, and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment.

Unemployment in Cookstown and Magherafelt

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the current level of unemployment in (i) the Cookstown area; and (ii) the Magherafelt area. (AQO 714/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) At September 2008 there were 474 Claimant Count unemployed persons in Cookstown District Council Area, (327 males and 147 females). This corresponds to 2.2% of persons of working age, compared to the Northern Ireland overall figure of 2.8%.
- (ii) At September 2008 there were 481 Claimant Count unemployed persons in Magherafelt District Council Area, (347 males and 134 females). This corresponds to 1.8% of persons of working age, compared to the Northern Ireland overall figure of 2.8%.

ENVIRONMENT

Incinerator in Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if Article 31 has been applied to the Rose Energy planning application for an incinerator in Glenavy. (AQW 1016/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I can confirm that Article 31 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 was applied to the Rose Energy proposal on 23 September 2008.

Improvements for Banbridge

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he is giving to environmental upgrades and improvements for Banbridge, given that it is one of the fastest growing urban areas. (AQW 1159/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Draft Banbridge / Newry & Mourne Plan 2015 was published on 22 August 2006 and contains designations, policies, proposals and zonings for Banbridge Town which reflect the fact that Banbridge town has been one of the fastest growing towns in Northern Ireland in recent years. The Draft Plan aim is to facilitate sustainable growth and development in Banbridge and build upon the positive developments already achieved.

In particular, the Draft Plan has designated 12 Development Opportunity Sites (comprising a total of 5.36 hectares) within Banbridge town centre. These are areas of vacant or under-utilised land which are zoned to encourage redevelopment and to accommodate town centre uses and thus support the vitality and viability of the town centre. With regard to environmental improvement, there are key site requirements for most of the opportunity sites seeking quality design and landscaping, for example, Bridge Street Development Opportunity Site requires a landscaped walkway/cycleway along the river Bann. The successful redevelopment of such sites would also reduce dereliction and improve the physical condition of the town centre.

The Draft Plan also seeks to protect and enhance the town's environmental quality by designating Local Landscape Policy Areas to safeguard local landscapes both within the town and on the urban fringe - including the River Bann corridor, important areas of mature vegetation and the setting of significant landmark buildings.

Similarly, the Plan seeks to protect the town's built heritage by designating an Area of Townscape Character in Banbridge town centre within which there is a presumption in favour of retaining any building which makes a positive contribution to the character of this part of the town centre.

I understand that the Department for Social Development completed a major public realm scheme in Banbridge town centre in September 2004. The scheme delivered significant improvement to Newry Street, Bridge Street and Church Square, and cost in the region of £1.4m. I have been advised that the Department for Social Development has no further plans to undertake work of this nature in Banbridge, due to budget constraints.

Lurgan Town Centre

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the impact of the publication of the draft Craigavon Area Plan 2010 on the development of Lurgan Town Centre. (AQW 1172/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I assume the member is referring to the Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries and Retail Designations Plan 2010 (CTCB&RDP) which was adopted on 30 June 2008 and deals with Lurgan Town Centre rather than the Craigavon Area Plan which was adopted in 2004. This response is therefore based on the potential impact of the Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries and Retail Designations Plan 2010 on the development of Lurgan town centre.

I believe that the town centre boundary, primary retail core and primary retail frontage designated for Lurgan in the CTCB&RDP provides an appropriate framework within which regional planning policy for retail development can be implemented in the context of the town centre. In addition I believe the designated town centre boundary makes adequate provision for opportunities to facilitate a level of overall commercial growth which reflects its status as a town centre. I should also point out that the Craigavon Area Plan 2010 identified a number of Development Opportunity Sites with the aim of encouraging redevelopment, accommodating town centre uses and thus supporting the vitality and viability of the town centre.

I am also aware of the need for urban regeneration in some of our town centres and of the important work being carried forward in this regard by the Department for Social Development (DSD). CTCB&RDP contains two important objectives which seek to support the work of regeneration within the plan area. They are:

To facilitate appropriate development within the town centres that will promote urban renaissance, create ease of access to services and community facilities, and to maximise the use of existing infrastructure; and

To promote vital and viable town centres.

My officials are familiar with the Lurgan Development Framework document, a non-statutory visionary plan for the development of Lurgan town centre over a 20-year period, commissioned by Craigavon Borough Council and sponsored by DSD. A Planning Service representative sat on the steering group for this study. I understand that DSD is of the view that the CTCB&RDP proposals are broadly consistent with the Lurgan Development Framework.

My officials are also aware that Craigavon Borough Council is working closely with DSD on the preparation of an integrated development framework for the Craigavon Urban Area, within the context of CAP and CTCB&RDP, to assist with the prioritisation of development opportunities across the three town centres of Lurgan, Portadown and Central Craigavon. I understand that

DSD is also contributing significantly to a public realm scheme in Lurgan town centre which will be taken forward by Craigavon Borough Council.

Planning Service will continue to facilitate development within all three town centres through the application of policies and proposals contained in CAP and CTCB&RDP, and prevailing regional planning policy.

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 ability to monitor and conserve salmon stocks. (AQW 1318/09)

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 ability to monitor water levels in one jurisdiction that may contribute to flooding in the other jurisdiction. (AQW 1319/09)

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 ability to deal effectively with air pollution. (AQW 1320/09)

The Minister of the Environment: None.

Equalisation Grant

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the progress his Department has made in the introduction of the Equalisation Grant to the Foyle constituency. (AQW 1325/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Local Government (General Grant) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 contain the detailed formula for distribution of the resources element of General Grant (Equalisation Grant) to district councils. Derry City Council is the only district council within the Foyle constituency and currently qualifies for Equalisation Grant. When the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner has completed his report and the boundaries of the eleven new councils have been defined, the formula for the allocation of the Equalisation Grant will be updated.

Bathing Waters

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what criteria are used to identify and designate bathing waters. (AQW 1333/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department will consider a candidate site for formal

identification as a bathing water in Northern Ireland, where bathing is not prohibited or inadvisable for reasons of safety; and usage at the candidate site exceeds a guide value of 100 users, which the Department equates with 45 bathers, as supported by a verification survey undertaken by the Department.

A body or individual nominating a site is required to provide evidence of usage in the first instance.

Planning Service

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment how many representations has the Minister made to the Planning Service on constituency planning cases, since becoming Minister. (AQW 1335/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since coming to office, I have made some 64 representations to the Planning Service and details of these are set out in the attached table.

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
Oakland Park, Carrickfergus	Hot food bars	Request for Info
15 Main Street, Larne and 28 Point Street, Larne	2 Retail Units, 9 apartments, 5 offices	Update
75 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	5 applications	Update
21 Tureagh Road, Larne	Slurry Tank and Retrospective application for livestock shed	Support
Opposite Ballygally Castle Hotel	Self contained units	Info re when decision to be taken
Circular Road, Larne	2 retail units	Support
Junction Road, Ballyboley	Farm store and new access	Update
267 Bay Road, Carnlough	Unauthorised development	Support
28 Regents Park, Larne	Two storey extension	Update
66 Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus	Unauthorised development	Update
1 and 3 Oakland Park, Carrickfergus	Hot food bars	Support
40 Craiganee Road, Larne	Change of access Replacement dwelling and garage	Updates
Belfast Road, Larne	Travellers Site	Oppose
13 Rhanbuoy Park, Carrickfergus	Demolition of existing property and erection of 6 apartments	Support
100 Glenarm Road, Larne	Freestanding rectangular sign	Oppose
209 Middle Road, Islandmagee	Unauthorised clay pigeon shooting activities	Oppose
13 Rhanbuoy Park, Carrickfergus	Apartment development	Support
Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Lidl food store	Update
11 Glenburn Avenue, Larne	Two storey extension	Update
41 and 43 Ballystrudder Road, Islandmagee	Alts and extension to dwelling	Update
Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Lidl food store	Update

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
80 Cable Road and 22 Belfast Road, Whitehead	10 Apartments	Update
267 Bay Road, Carnlough	Unauthorised development	Update
28 Regents Park, Larne	Two storey extension	Support
54 Dickeystown Road, Glenarm	Replacement Dwelling House	Update
Land at Circular Road, Larne	2 retail warehouse units	Update
Site (20 Hillhead Road) between 18 and 22 Hillhead Road, Ballycarry	Dwelling and garage	Support
1 & 3 Oakland Park, Carrickfergus	Hot food bar	Update
2 Donegall Gardens, Whitehead	2 Detached Dwellings	Oppose
North of No. 4 Junction Road, Ballyclare	Farm Store and relocation of entrance	Update
9 Millvale, Ballygally, Larne	Replacement double garage with non-commercial workshop above	Support
41 Drummcrow Road, Drummcrow, Glenarm	Application for change of use of barn (formerly shop) to Saddlery	Update
100 Glenarm Road, Larne	Free-Standing Rectangular Sign	Update
East of 115 Ballymena Road, Carnlough	Erection of greenhouses, plant packing facilities, nursery areas and proprietors dwelling	Support
8 Marine Road, Carnlough, Ballymena	demolition of existing dwelling and garage and construction of a single retail unit and 2 No. 3 bedroom apartments	Support
Adj. to 40 Craiganee Road, Larne	Replacement dwelling & garage	Update
40 Craiganee Road, Larne	Change of access	Update
109a Drumahoe Road, Millbrook	Development 16 two-bed apartments and 2 three bed apartments with parking	Update
15 Quarry Cottages, Whitehead		No valid application
19 Largy Road, Carnlough	Four bed wing to rear of existing residential home	Update
Tower Road, Larne	Housing development	Update
75 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Lidl food store	Update
8 Branch Road, Larne	Demolish existing dwelling and erect 9 apartments and associated parking	Update
13 Rhanbuoy Park, Carrickfergus	6 apartments	Update
Drumngreagh Hotel Site		Update
75 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Lidl food store	Update
13 Rhanbuoy Park, Carrickfergus	6 apartments	Update
54 Scotch Quarter, Carrickfergus	Change of use form residential to commercial	Update
Carrickfergus Masterplan		SW to arrange meeting
11 Glenburn Avenue, Larne	Two storey extension	Update
68 Millbay Road, Islandmagee	Retirement dwelling	Update
41-43 Ballystrudder Road, Islandmagee	Alts and extension to dwelling	Update
Larne Area Plan		Update
1 Whinfield Larne	Demolition of existing dwelling and replacement with 1 apartment and 2 duplex units	Update
24 Whinfield Larne	Gabion wall	Update

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
Old Courtauld's site Carrickfergus		Update
42 Circular Road	13 Residential Units	Oppose
Sanda Road	Totem Sign	Support
Carrick Application	Unknown	General enquiry
Edenmore Court	Sewerage problems	Request for copy of drainage plans
755a Shore Road	Infill development	Query regarding planning condition
38-39 Old Manse Road	Residential Development	Oppose
133-135 Jordanstown Road	Apartment Development	Non – committal
16-18 Old Manse Road	14 units for Sheltered Accommodation	General enquiry

Planning Service

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to detail the cases from his constituency in which he made representation to the Planning Service; and (ii) if each representation was in (a) support; or (b) opposition to the application, since becoming a Minister. (AQW 1336/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since coming to office, I have made some 64 representations to the Planning Service and details of these are set out in the attached table.

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
Oakland Park, Carrickfergus	Hot food bars	Request for Info
15 Main Street, Larne and 28 Point Street, Larne	2 Retail Units, 9 apartments, 5 offices	Update
75 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	5 applications	Update
21 Tureagh Road, Larne	Slurry Tank and Retrospective application for livestock shed	Support
Opposite Ballygally Castle Hotel	Self contained units	Info re when decision to be taken
Circular Road, Larne	2 retail units	Support
Junction Road, Ballyboley	Farm store and new access	Update
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28 Regents Park, Larne	Two storey extension	Update
66 Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus	Unauthorised development	Update
1 and 3 Oakland Park, Carrickfergus	Hot food bars	Support

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
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Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Lidl food store	Update
11 Glenburn Avenue, Larne	Two storey extension	Update
41 and 43 Ballystrudder Road, Islandmagee	Alts and extension to dwelling	Update
Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Lidl food store	Update
80 Cable Road and 22 Belfast Road, Whitehead	10 Apartments	Update
267 Bay Road, Carnlough	Unauthorised development	Update
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Land at Circular Road, Larne	2 retail warehouse units	Update

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North of No. 4 Junction Road, Ballyclare	Farm Store and relocation of entrance	Update
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Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
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Drumngreagh Hotel Site		Update
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Larne Area Plan		Update
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24 Whinfield Larne	Gabion wall	Update
Old Courtauld's site Carrickfergus		Update
42 Circular Road	13 Residential Units	Oppose
Sanda Road	Totem Sign	Support
Carrick Application	Unknown	General enquiry
Edenmore Court	Sewerage problems	Request for copy of drainage plans
755a Shore Road	Infill development	Query regarding planning condition
38-39 Old Manse Road	Residential Development	Oppose
133-135 Jordanstown Road	Apartment Development	Non – committal
16-18 Old Manse Road	14 units for Sheltered Accommodation	General enquiry

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment how many staff are employed in his Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff.
(AQW 1338/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Departmental private office has a total staffing compliment of 8 people and the annual cost of employing these staff is £207,000.

Noise Nuisance

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions for noise nuisance there have been in the North Down Borough Council area, in the last 5 years. (AQW 1357/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been 2 prosecutions for noise nuisance in North Down Borough Council in the 5 years up to 2007.

Planning Enforcement Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) how many planning enforcement notices have been served for breach of planning regulations, in the North Down Council area; and (ii) how many have been enforced from January 2007 to August 2008. (AQW 1358/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Divisional Office currently holds records of enforcement notices issued from 1999. Since then the Division has served 18 Enforcement Notices in the North Down Council area.

During the period from January 2007 and August 2008 two notices were served on the same site, one for 'operational development' and the other for 'change of use'. Both notices were appealed. A hearing was held on 2 September 2008 which the Planning Appeals Commission adjourned. The hearing has been rescheduled for 23 October 2008.

Water Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment pursuant to his answer to AQW 669/09, to detail how many of these incidents were repeat offences. (AQW 1374/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the last five years, there have been 20 incidents of water pollution, which were repeat offences, involving five companies in the South Antrim area. As the breakdown of information on repeat offences across Northern Ireland is not readily available, my officials will send this information directly to you as soon as possible.

Borough Status

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what provision there will be for the eleven new councils to have borough status, where all or a majority of the existing councils that will form the new council, have borough status. (AQW 1376/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is looking at this issue and will be seeking legal advice on bringing forward provisions similar to those available to councils at the last local government reorganisation. These provisions will be included in the forthcoming Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill.

Water Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 669/09, how many of these offences were (i) successful prosecutions resulting in a fine; (ii) successful prosecutions resulting in other sanctions, detailing these sanctions; (iii) unsuccessful prosecutions; (iv) offences resulting in enforcement warning letters being issued to offenders with no accompanying prosecution; and (v) incidents where an offender could not be identified. (AQW 1383/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The enforcement options open to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to water pollution incidents are prosecution, warning letter and, more recently, enforcement notices.

The tables below set out a detailed breakdown of the outcomes of incidents throughout Northern Ireland and the South Antrim area over the past 5 years.

TABLE 1 –
INCIDENT OUTCOMES IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2003 - 2007

Year	Total number of incidents	Number of successful prosecutions resulting in a fine	Number of prosecutions withdrawn or dismissed	Number of warning letters issued	Number of occasions when offender could not be identified
2003	2499	89	5	176	325
2004	2207	62	3	195	197
2005	2183	38	5	185	251
2006*	2081	26	4	158	242
2007#	2295	20	2	145	266

* 12 cases pending

41 cases pending

TABLE 2 – INCIDENT OUTCOMES IN THE SOUTH ANTRIM AREA 2003 - 2007

Year	Total number of incidents	Number of successful prosecution resulting in a fine	Number of prosecutions withdrawn or dismissed	Number of warning letters issued	Number of occasions when offender could not be identified
2003	161	4	0	5	38
2004	221	1	0	7	32
2005	217	1	0	16	47
2006*	204	2	0	17	41
2007#	203	0	0	12	52

* 1 case pending

2 cases pending

In addition to this, the Courts have imposed the following sanctions as a result of successful prosecutions in Northern Ireland in the past five years:-

- 2003 – 2 Conditional Discharges;
- 2004 – 4 Conditional Discharges, 1 Prison Sentence, 1 Suspended Prison Sentence; and
- 2005 – 1 Conditional Discharge.

None of these cases relate to the South Antrim area.

Foreign National Drivers

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what measures are in place to encourage foreign national drivers to improve their road safety skills and to increase their awareness of the rules of the road. (AQW 1412/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has a responsibility to raise public awareness of the nature and scale of the road safety problem in Northern Ireland, and has therefore been developing measures to improve the behaviour and attitudes of all drivers including foreign nationals.

The Department promotes use of the Highway Code, which contains practical and easily understood road safety advice, as essential reading for all road users. Work is already under way to translate the Code into Lithuanian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese and Russian, which according to the NI Council for Ethnic Minorities represent the top five languages for which translation services are required.

The Code will be available in these languages on DOE's road safety website at www.roadsafetyni.gov.uk by December 2008.

The current portfolio of successful television and radio advertisements has also been translated into key foreign languages and will be delivered along with five new instructional advertisements for television on 'better driver behaviour'.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how much it costs on an annual basis, to maintain the Departmental website. (AQW 1415/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The DOE website and the websites of its 3 Agencies are managed by the Department's Information Management Branch and the respective Agency web management team and is just one function, in a range of other duties, carried out by these Branches. Content managers across the Department update and maintain their own pages on the website. These tasks account for a small proportion of staff time and so it is not possible to identify the staff costs related to this activity.

The DOE website, like other NICS sites, is hosted by the IT Assist Web Hosting Team within the Department of Finance and Personnel and again a breakdown of costs in relation to maintenance is not available for individual departmental websites.

The Department and its Agencies pay fees each year in relation to the registration of domain names, the total cost for the Department and its Agencies in respect of registration fees amounts to £882.39.

Consultancy work on Departmental sites has amounted to £48,587.50.

The total cost to the Department and its Agencies for website maintenance is £49,469.89.

Illegal Taxis

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement cases have been brought against illegal taxis, in each of the last 5 years, broken down by constituency. (AQW 1417/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of enforcement cases brought against illegal taxis, in each of the last 5 years, broken down by constituency is contained within Annex 1.

NUMBER OF PROSECUTION CASES REPORTED ANNEX 1

AREA	April 03- March 04	April 04 – March 05	April 05 – March 06	April 06- March 07	April 07 – March 08	April 08 – To date
*Belfast	225	143	120	74	110	29

AREA	April 03- March 04	April 04 - March 05	April 05 - March 06	April 06- March 07	April 07 - March 08	April 08 - To date
East Antrim	0	0	3	5	0	0
East Londonderry	17	0	0	0	2	0
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1	4	5	8	6	5
Foyle	50	40	31	50	36	7
Lagan Valley	0	2	4	1	3	9
Mid Ulster	8	5	5	2	24	7
Newry & Armagh	5	1	0	3	4	1
North Antrim	26	8	1	13	5	2
North Down	1	0	0	7	1	0
South Antrim	0	0	0	0	2	0
South Down	0	2	2	8	4	0
Strangford	0	0	0	2	3	0
Upper Bann	0	0	1	0	1	1
West Tyrone	3	7	1	1	6	0

* not broken down by constituency

Illegal Taxis

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what steps have been taken to combat illegal taxis, particularly in areas outside of Belfast. (AQW 1418/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency has a primary responsibility for the delivery of taxi enforcement in Northern Ireland. Since April 2003, its taxi enforcement officers, working in partnership with the PSNI, carried out some 786 intelligence led targeted enforcement operations and scrutinised 14,492 taxis and drivers for compliance at the roadside. Of these, 423 enforcement operations were conducted outside Belfast with 7,479 taxis and drivers checked. A total of 270 commercial taxi radio sets have been seized from unlicensed vehicles, 1163 drivers reported for prosecution, £175,000 in fines imposed and 1940 penalty points awarded with driver disqualifications totalling 60 years.

The use of intelligence led targeted enforcement remains key in assisting with the effective detection of illegal operators and this strategic approach has proven extremely effective in that, coupled with the introduction of the NI taxi plating scheme, the number of licensed taxis has increased from 6500 in 03/04 to 10,600 in 07/08.

The Agency has also been successful in securing additional financial resources following a Comprehensive Spending Review bid (CSR2) submitted during 2007. As a result, the number of officers dedicated to taxi enforcement will increase progressively from 5 to 18 officers over the next three year period. During the same period new enforcement powers within the Taxis Act should be implemented including the power to enable enforcement officers to confiscate unlicensed taxis and issue fixed penalty tickets. This should further deter illegal activity and repeat offenders.

Tidal Turbines

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to discuss with the major fishing organisations about the provision of tidal turbines along the Antrim Coast in the Irish Sea. (AQW 1429/09)

The Minister of the Environment: On 18 September 2008 and 12 October 2008, respectively, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) issued a request to a number of consultees, including the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), for a environmental impact assessment scoping opinion on initial proposals by THETIS and by ScottishPower Renewable (UK) Ltd for tidal turbine electricity generation projects off the North Antrim coast.

The major fishing organisations are consulted by the Fisheries Division of DARD and this arrangement applies to all stages of a project of this nature. This obviates the need at this stage for direct discussions with the major fishing organisations.

Co-ordinated consultations are undertaken by NIEA in order to assist the Environmental Impact Assessment process and also to enable a full assessment of any application for a licence under the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 to construct or operate tidal turbines.

Tidal Turbines

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has had any discussions with Scotland Power about tidal turbines in the Irish Sea off the Antrim Coast. (AQW 1431/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has held discussions with ScottishPower Renewable (UK) Ltd to outline the likely regulatory requirements associated with their

proposals for commercial power generation from tidal turbines in the waters off the North Antrim Coast.

Enforcement Orders

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 589/09, to detail (i) the number of enforcement orders that were issued to businesses in the Mallusk area as a result of the environmental risk assessments performed so far; (ii) the companies that received the orders; and (iii) the conditions attached to each order. (AQW 1451/09)

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.

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 previous knowledge 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 125 Pollution Risk Assessments which have already been completed are detailed in Table A below.

TABLE A

Risk Assessment	High	Medium	Low
Number of sites	20	38	67

To date, NIEA is progressing 4 Enforcement Notices and 16 pre-Enforcement Notices, some of which may lead to formal prosecutions. For legal reasons I cannot provide further details until this process has been completed. When they are available I will ask my officials to provide these to you. In addition, 4 cases are now being prepared for submission to the Public Prosecution Service and are therefore sub judice.

Enforcement Notices and pre-Enforcement Notices are site specific and intended to prevent the discharge or deposit of any poisonous, noxious or polluting matter from entering a waterway or underground strata.

I would however state that NIEA staff are dealing with the issue and will vigorously pursue those that have caused pollution or those that do not comply with conditions attached to Enforcement Notices.

Restoration Order for Damaged Lands

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 700/09, to provide an update on the progress being made on the restoration order for damaged lands. (AQW 1458/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the one case where a Court granted an ASSI restoration order the landowner complied with the prescriptions to the satisfaction of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and previously damaged lands have now recovered.

Review of the Regional Development Strategy

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 654/09, if the recent change in the definition of brownfield land, in the Review of the Regional Development Strategy, will have an impact on the consideration of planning applications before the publication of the policy addendum to Planning Policy Statement 7: Quality Residential Environments. (AQW 1459/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The recent change in the definition of brownfield land does not preclude the submission of planning applications for residential development on areas of open space or garden areas of dwellings or apartments. It therefore will not have a direct impact on the processing of these planning applications.

Such applications will continue to be assessed in the context of the amended guidance in the Regional Development Strategy, the relevant area plan, planning policies and guidance including; PPS 7: Quality Residential Environments, PPS 12 "Housing in Settlements", and Planning Circular (PC) 03/07 "Assessing Planning Applications for Residential Development in Urban Areas, Villages and other Small Settlements" and DCAN 8: Housing in Existing Urban Areas.

Unauthorised Sand Extractions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if enforcement proceedings have been taken against the person adjacent to Rooney Fish, the Harbour, Kilkeel, for unauthorised sand extractions causing water displacement. (AQW 1490/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is not aware of any unauthorised sand extraction in the Harbour area of Kilkeel and is therefore not pursuing any enforcement action.

NIEA staff will however visit the area to check whether an unauthorised extraction has taken place. If enforcement action is appropriate, NIEA will pursue.

My officials will contact you directly to inform you of the outcome of the investigation.

Habitat and Conservation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the contribution made by (i) the British Association for Shooting and Conservation; and (ii) Countryside Alliance Northern Ireland, in bringing changes to habitat and conservation; and if he will commend them on their work. (AQW 1523/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Both the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), and the Countryside Alliance (CA), make a valuable contribution to the conservation of habitats and species throughout Northern Ireland.

This year the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) signed a memorandum of co-operation with BASC whereby NIEA and BASC will adopt joint approaches to habitat and species management including project and case work, education and awareness and research and monitoring. NIEA has supported BASC in running a “Green Shoots” project where members of clubs record and report the wildlife which occurs on habitats that affiliated clubs manage for their sport.

BASC has been funded to employ a species manager to promote the population of the Curlew in mid-Antrim.

Both BASC and CA have been involved in agreeing action to promote local populations of the Irish Hare and the Red Grouse and they continue to work with affiliated members to promote their sporting interests and the conservation of wildlife.

I am therefore very happy to commend the good work that BASC and the CA do in conserving these aspects of our local biodiversity.

Brent Geese

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the impact that the increasing numbers of Brent Geese in Strangford Lough has had having on the numbers of other wildlife in the area, over the last 3 years. (AQW 1524/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no evidence of Light-bellied Brent Geese having an impact on other wildlife populations on Strangford Lough.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to list the repair notices issued by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, in the past 3 years to September 2008. (AQW 1543/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been no repair notices issued by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, nor the former Environment and Heritage Service in the past 3 years to September 2008. The compulsory acquisition of a building at risk in Sion Mills, resulting from non-compliance with a repairs notice that had been served in 2003, took place in July 2008.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his proposals to ensure that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency makes greater use of repair notices. (AQW 1544/09)

The Minister of the Environment: It is the policy of the Northern Environment Agency (NIEA) to enter into dialogue with an owner of a listed building in an attempt to find a way to rectify the situation before resorting to the use of repair notices. The implications of the use of such notices are considerable, not least the potential cost to the public purse, as it may ultimately lead to the compulsory acquisition of a building – as was the case with the Stable Block at Sion Mills. Nonetheless, NIEA will continue to look at each case on its merits. It is important however to note that the Department can acquire listed buildings if owners do not co-operate over their maintenance and use.

Repair Notices

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to give a comparison of the number of repair notices served in Northern Ireland with those served in England and Wales. (AQW 1545/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Repair notices in England and Wales are served by the Local Authorities. As the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is unaware of any centralised, or readily accessible, record of the numbers there, it is therefore impossible to compare numbers.

Single Homes in the Countryside

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to clarify if planning applications for single homes in the countryside, applied for before 16 March 2006, were invalidated after that date due

to site lines being determined as inadequate, thereby refused under Draft PPS 14. (AQW 1558/09)

The Minister of the Environment: It is unlikely that planning applications for single homes in the countryside submitted on or before 16 March 2006 were established to be invalid due to inadequate sight lines and subsequently assessed against the policies set out in Draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 14: Sustainable Development.

Following validation my Department will consult DRD Roads Service on planning applications for advice on roads related matters and have regard to what they say as part of the planning application process. Indeed an amendment to a planning application may be acceptable where additional land is required to provide visibility splays at the proposed access position. In assessing development proposals my Department will therefore seek to ensure that access arrangements for single dwellings in the countryside are safe and will not be reduced to such a level that danger is likely to be caused.

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 186/09, to detail what action he is taking to ensure that Ulster Farm By-Products comply with the conditions of the enforcement order. (AQW 1569/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) will consider if further enforcement action is required when they assess whether the Enforcement Notice has been complied with. At this stage, however, it would not be appropriate to speculate on what future action NIEA may undertake.

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment how many complaints have been received by the Environment and Heritage Service/Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to offensive odours emanating from Ulster Farm By-Products in Glenavy, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1570/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and its predecessor body has regulated Ulster Farm By-Products Ltd from November 2005. Prior to that Lisburn City Council was responsible for the regulation of the Company. From November 2005 to September 2008, NIEA has received 619 complaints relating to odour in the area around Ulster Farm By-Products. The annual breakdown is tabulated below.

Year	Number of Complaints
November 2005 – December 2005	35
2006	235
2007	197
January – September 2008	152

Climate Change

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he had with his officials prior to writing his article, published in the News Letter in September 2008, on the causes of climate change. (AQW 1574/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since taking up Ministerial office in June, I have had and continue to have regular discussions with my officials on the causes of climate change. I have made clear my own view on this matter and this was reflected in the article that appeared in the News Letter on 5 September 2008.

Residential Backlands

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration his Department is giving to introducing planning policies aimed at protecting and improving residential backlands. (AQW 1613/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Officials are currently working on a policy addendum to Planning Policy Statement 7 'Quality Residential Environments' to reinforce the application of current policy on housing within urban areas, and take account of recent adjustments to the Regional Development Strategy. The addendum will also 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.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what funding is available from his Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1350/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): My department is not responsible for

providing support services to parents with young children. The department therefore has no resources available in its baselines to make any funding of this nature available.

Rates Relief to Churches

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his Department's policy on providing rates relief to churches and other places of worship; and what plans he has to change this policy. (AQW 1377/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Churches that are used for public religious worship are fully exempt from rates and this has been a longstanding provision. I have no plans to change this policy.

Icelandic Banks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department is aware of any public bodies that had deposits with Icelandic banks. (AQW 1409/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm that no public body had deposits with Icelandic Banks.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much it costs on an annual basis, to maintain the Departmental website. (AQW 1414/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The DFP website is managed by an Information Officer
AQW 1456/09 EU FUNDING IN LAST 10 YEARS£M'S

Funding Area	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
EU Structural Funds	145,560	137,790	178,450	145,046	114,046	135,516	93,024	261,210	230,317	106,511
Agriculture CAP etc	276,526	286,291	282,034	179,842	200,170	184,654	157,423	170,490	134,996	173,974
Trans European Networks (TENS)	nil	nil	0.290	nil	nil	nil	1,179	0.270	1,419	0.543
Other	0.153	0.030	0.118	0.047	0.063	0.071	0.104	0.104	0.032	0.137
Total	422,239	424,111	430,892	324,935	314,279	320,241	251,730	430,074	366,764	281,165

as one element of their overall responsibilities. Content managers/authors within each directorate/branch maintain its own pages on the website. Only a small percentage of their time is dedicated to this activity and it is not possible to identify the staff costs involved in this specific role.

As with other NICS websites the DFP site is hosted by Delivery and Innovation Division (DID) within DFP and costs incurred within DID are not available for individual departmental websites.

In addition it costs the Department £25 a year to renew the domain names for the Departmental website.

Icelandic Banks

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if any public money belonging to (i) his Department; (ii) public bodies, was invested in Icelandic Banks; and if so, to outline what steps he is taking to protect or recover these investments. (AQW 1453/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm that no public money belonging to either my Department or any Departmental public body was invested in Icelandic Banks.

EU Funding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total amount of EU funding received in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1456/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Details of EU Funding received in the last 10 years through Northern Ireland Government Departments is detailed in the attached table.

Civil Service

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action his Department is taking to address the under representation of Protestant males in the junior and middle grades of the Civil Service. (AQW 1462/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since 2002, the NICS has included affirmative statements in all advertisements for Administrative Assistant (AA) and Administrative Officer (AO) positions, to which applications from members of the Protestant community are particularly welcomed.

New competitions for AA and AO were launched last week and as well as carrying advertisements in the 3 main local newspapers, we also advertised on local radio stations, in public buildings, via the jobcentre network and issued posters and flyers to community groups and schools in the controlled sector. In addition we have removed the requirement for academic qualifications.

This approach was adopted in the last round of AA & AO competitions and initial analysis indicates that the number of applications from the Protestant community increased by just over 10%. My officials plan to carry out further in-depth analysis, when all appointments have been made.

We also made radical changes to the most recent Executive Officer II competition, which was launched in late 2007, when we accepted 2 years relevant experience in lieu of the formal academic qualifications. It is too soon to draw any conclusions from this competition.

Peace III

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the Peace III cluster comprising Derry City Council, Omagh District Council and Strabane District Council had their action plan approved by the Special EU Programmes Body. (AQW 1508/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The PEACE III Priority 1 Steering Committee recommended the Action Plan submitted by the cluster comprising Derry City Council, Omagh District Council and Strabane District Council for approval on 13 May 2008.

Peace III

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why the Peace III cluster comprising Derry City Council, Omagh District Council and Strabane

District Council is not open for applications from the voluntary and community sector. (AQW 1510/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Governance arrangements for the local authority partnership are currently being finalised. It is expected that a call for applications will issue immediately following completion of this process.

Peace III

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the Peace III cluster comprising Derry City Council, Omagh District Council and Strabane District Council will replace the interim partnership; and what mechanisms will be used to appoint the North West Peace III Partnership. (AQW 1511/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The final partnership will replace the interim partnership following agreement to the cluster's governance arrangements and appointment of partnership members.

Members of the partnership will be appointed via an open application and selection process which will begin immediately following agreement on governance.

2011 Census

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the anticipated cost is of the 2011 census. (AQW 1521/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cost of the 2011 census is currently expected to be £21.5m over the period 2008/09-2013/14.

Land and Property Services

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if councils can recover the costs associated with vacant property surveys carried out after 30 November 2008 from Land and Property Services. (AQW 1529/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services has agreed an arrangement with district councils to validate the status of all properties recorded on the rating database as vacant. Councils have been advised that, in order to maximise potential future revenue take, the exercise should be completed, wherever possible by 30 November 2008.

Land and Property Services will reimburse the costs associated with the collection of data in relation to vacant properties up to the end of the 2008/2009 financial year.

Vacant Properties

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assistance his Department is giving to councils in collating vacant properties and new properties in the Ards Borough Council area. (AQW 1616/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services is currently working closely with all 26 councils to validate the status of properties recorded on the rating database as vacant. Ards Council (along with many other councils) is acting as Land and Property Services' agent and is being paid for its data validation work by Land and Property Services. This exercise, which will be completed in the coming weeks, will improve the accuracy of the rates database.

Land and Property Services and Ards Borough Council will soon implement a new arrangement whereby the Council's Building Control staff will collect, during their normal property inspection work, survey data on new and altered properties on behalf of Land and Property Services. This data, collected at no burden to the Council, will be used to value the properties and update the Valuation List. The arrangement builds on the current situation where Land and Property Services receives Commencement List information on new or altered properties from Building Control sections of councils.

Budget Stocktake Exercise

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the terms of reference for the current Budget Stocktake exercise. (AQW 1659/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The primary objectives of the ongoing Strategic Stocktake are to:

review progress to date against 3 year plans and register any reduced requirements for 2009-10 and 2010-11 against the allocations set out in each Department's settlement letter; and,

identify any significant increased requirements for 2009-10 and 2010-11 only and propose how these might be addressed by departments, through an adjustment of existing plans and priorities.

Land and Property Services

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the potential for data sharing between Land and Property Services and the utilities, to facilitate a pricing structure that reflects the ability

of consumers to pay for electricity, gas, and water. (AQW 1661/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: LPS holds a range of data to support its business activities. The Agency has data sharing arrangements with a number of other public-sector bodies. It has also recently launched GeoHub NI® as a repository and data sharing tool for spatial data. LPS is willing to engage with utility companies to discuss making its data available to them, subject to appropriate data sharing agreements and protocols.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Fire Engines

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) type; (ii) year of manufacture; (iii) mileage; and (iv) base location of each front line fire engine and special fire appliances. (AQW 923/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The information currently available is as follows:

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
VOLVO FL6 (14 SUPER-CHARGER) WRL	Antrim Fire Station	2000	56477
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Antrim Fire Station	2007	12301
VOLVO FL6/14 (SUPER-CHARGER) WRL	Armagh Fire Station	2000	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Armagh Fire Station	2004	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Ballycastle Fire Station	2005	54496
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Ballycastle Fire Station	1994	30519
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Ballyclare Fire Station	2005	20008
VOLVO FL614 S/charger WRL	Ballyclare Fire Station	1997	18577
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Ballymena Fire Station	1995	16674

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
VOLVO FLL 240 WRL CAFS	Ballymena Fire Station	2008	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Ballymoney Fire Station	1993	23753
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Ballymoney Fire Station	2007	11465
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Ballynahinch Fire Station	1995	23860
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Ballynahinch Fire Station	2007	6249
VOLVO FL6H 250 (14) WRL	Ballywalter Fire Station	2001	36675
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Banbridge Fire Station	2005	
DENNIS SABRE WRL	Banbridge Fire Station	1996	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Bangor Fire Station	1994	39666
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Bangor Fire Station	2006	21873
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Belleek Fire Station	1995	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Cadogan Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FL6 WRL Integral	Cadogan Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Carnlough Fire Station	1996	21372
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Carrickfergus Fire Station	2007	7146
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Carrickfergus Fire Station	1996	45617
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Carryduff Fire Station	1996	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Castlelurg Fire Station	2004	37702
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Castlelurg Fire Station	1993	13620
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Central Fire Station	2005	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Central Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Clogher Fire Station	2005	20665
DENNIS SS RSC	Clogher Fire Station	1995	26740
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Coleraine Fire Station	2006	14260

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
VOLVO FL6 WRL Integral	Coleraine Fire Station	2007	7108
MERCEDES 1124F WRL	Comber Fire Station	1996	27672
VOLVO FL6H 250 (14) WRL	Cookstown Fire Station	2001	114268
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Cookstown Fire Station	2004	16155
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Crescent Link Fire Station	2006	32727
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Crescent Link Fire Station	1996	41185
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Crossmaglen Fire Station	1995	
VOLVO FL6 (14 SUPER- CHARGER) WRL	Crumlin Fire Station	2000	75354
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Cushendall Fire Station	2004	7038
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Donaghadee Fire Station	2004	25386
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Downpatrick Fire Station	2005	
VOLVO FL614 S/charger WRL	Downpatrick Fire Station	1998	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Dromore Fire Station	1992	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Dromore Fire Station	1995	25840
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Dungannon Fire Station	1996	77414
VOLVO FL614 S/charger WRL	Dungannon Fire Station	1998	35719
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Dungiven Fire Station	2004	7183
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Enniskillen Fire Station	1995	34052
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Enniskillen Fire Station	2007	2560
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Fintona Fire Station	2004	26260
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Glengormley Fire Station	1995	94817
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Glengormley Fire Station	2007	12413
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Hollywood Fire Station	2004	6158
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Hollywood Fire Station	1996	18291

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Irvinestown Fire Station	1995	33832
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Keady Fire Station	2006	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Kilkeel Fire Station	2005	
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Kilkeel Fire Station	1996	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Kilrea Fire Station	1994	22576
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Knock Fire Station	2005	
VOLVO FLL 240 WRL	Knock Fire Station	2008	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Larne Fire Station	1994	23595
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Larne Fire Station	2006	8148
VOLVO FL6 (14 SUPER-CHARGER) WRL	Limavady Fire Station	2000	27980
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Limavady Fire Station	1995	76054
VOLVO FL6H 250 (14) WRL	Lisburn Fire Station	2001	24524
VOLVO FLL 240 WRL	Lisburn Fire Station	2008	5226
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Lisnaskea Fire Station	1995	101342
VOLVO FL614 S/charger WRL	Lisnaskea Fire Station	1998	45783
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Lurgan Fire Station	2004	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Lurgan Fire Station	2007	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Maghera Fire Station	1993	26480
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Maghera Fire Station	2006	7563
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Magherafelt Fire Station	2004	6128
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Magherafelt Fire Station	2005	19677
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Newcastle Fire Station	2005	
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Newcastle Fire Station	2005	

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
VOLVO FL6/14 (SUPER-CHARGER) WRL	Newry Fire Station	2000	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Newry Fire Station	2005	
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Newtownards Fire Station	2005	13184
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Newtownards Fire Station	2007	14918
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Newtown-hamilton Fire Station	2004	7617
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Newtown-hamilton Fire Station	1996	
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Newtown-stewart Fire Station	1995	2283
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Northland Road Fire Station	2005	28566
VOLVO FLL 240 WRL	Northland Road Fire Station	2008	5494
VOLVO FM9 Rescue Pump	Omagh Fire Station	2006	6116
VOLVO FL6 WRL Integral CAFs	Omagh Fire Station	2007	7937
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Pomeroy Fire Station	1994	27185
VOLVO FL6 WRL Integral CAFs	Portadown Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FL614 S/charger WRL	Portadown Fire Station	1998	
DENNIS SS RSC WRL	Portaferry Fire Station	1993	11803
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Portrush Fire Station	2005	21319
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Portrush Fire Station	1994	108244
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Portstewart Fire Station	2005	11954
VOLVO FL614 S/charger WRL	Portstewart Fire Station	1997	96729
VOLVO FL6 (PL)	Rathfriland Fire Station	1990	30875
VOLVO FS7 WRL	Rathfriland Fire Station	1996	

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
VOLVO FL4 PL	Rathlin Island Fire Station	1990	
VOLVO FL6 WRL Integral CAFs	Springfield Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Springfield Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FL6/14 (SUPER-CHARGER) WRL	Strabane Fire Station	2000	77786
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Strabane Fire Station	2006	7762
VOLVO FL6 (14 SUPER-CHARGER) WRL	Warrenpoint Fire Station	2000	27491
VOLVO FL6H 250 (14) WRL	Warrenpoint Fire Station	2001	37785
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Westland Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FL6 WRL	Whitehead Fire Station	2004	10196
VOLVO FL6 WRL Integral	Whitla Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FLL 240 WRL	Whitla Fire Station	2008	

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Central Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Whitla Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Omagh Fire Station	2006	4593
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Crescent Link Fire Station	2006	7310
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Central Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Training Centre	2006	

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Westland Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Portadown Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Whitla Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Central Fire Station	2006	
MAN - POD CARRIER POD TRANS-PORTER	Newry Fire Station	2006	
VOLVO FM9 ALP	Knock Fire Station	2007	
VOLVO FM9 ALP	Northland Fire Station	2008	
VOLVO FL10 Bronto	Springfield Fire Station	1993	
VOLVO FL6 HP	Eastern Area	1992	
VOLVO FL6 HP	Portadown Fire Station	1989	
IVECO MAGIRUS TTL	Western Area	1992	57146
VOLVO FL6 Command Support Unit	Lisburn Fire Station	2004	19074
VOLVO FL6 Command Support Unit	Irvinestown Fire Station	2005	8782
VOLVO FL6 Command Support Unit	Strabane Fire Station	2005	14698
VOLVO FL6 Command Support Unit	Kilrea Fire Station	2006	44066
VOLVO FL6 Rescue Tender	Central Fire Station	2001	
VOLVO FL6 Rescue Tender	Ballymena Fire Station	2001	15782
VOLVO FL6 Rescue Tender	Crescent Link Fire Station	2001	61710
VOLVO FL6 Rescue Tender	Newry Fire Station	2001	22591

Type	Station	Year	Mileage
VOLVO FL6 Rescue Tender	Dungannon Fire Station	2004	20099
Daf 2100 Water Tanker	Dungiven Fire Station	1999	6674
VOLVO FM9 Water Tanker	Pomeroy Fire Station	2004	11928
LEYLAND Water Tanker	Belleek Fire Station	1997	377150
VOLVO FM9 Water Tanker	Warrenpoint Fire Station	2005	5544
LANDROVER 110 COUNTY STATION WAGON	Specialist Rescue Team (Central)	1999	
LANDROVER DEFENDER 110 STATION WAGON TD5	Omagh Fire Station	2001	25110
LANDROVER DEFENDER 110 STATION WAGON TD5	Newcastle Fire Station	2001	
VOLVO FL6 OPs Support Unit	Crescent Link Fire Station	1999	73065
VOLVO FS7 OPs Support Unit	Whitla Fire Station	1996	
BEDFORD TL OPs Support Unit	Newry Fire Station	1984	
VOLVO FS7 Foam Tender	Glengormley Fire Station	1994	87417
VOLVO FS7 Foam Tender	Northland Road Fire Station	1994	114031
FORD IVECO ARTIC TRACTOR BULK FOAM	Technical Services	1995	

WRL Water Tender Ladder

WRL CAFS Water Tender Ladder with Compressed Air Foam System

ALP Aerial Ladder Platform

Bronto Aerial Ladder Platform

HP Hydraulic Platform

TTL Turntable Ladder

Ambulances

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) age; and (ii)

mileage, of each ambulance in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1010/09)

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 age and mileage of each A&E ambulance in the Northern Division are shown in the table below.

Station	Age (years)	Mileage (Sept 2008)
Antrim	2	68,709
	5	154,609
	7	74,276
Ballycastle	5	192,663
	5	145,894
	9	239,158
Ballymena	4	208,350
	4	223,342
	5	268,403
	9	234,260
Ballymoney A&E	5	121,461
	5	185,563
	9	158,041
Carrick A&E	5	198,338
	5	240,663
	5	119,551
Coleraine A&E	1	88,193
	5	209,206
	7	123,124
	9	161,335
	9	188,006
Cookstown A&E	1	72,649
	5	147,151
Larne A&E	1	113,210
	4	246,722
	4	131,295
	5	172,472
Magherafelt A&E	1	82,241
	4	116,245
	5	148,901
	5	124,202
	9	183,702

Station	Age (years)	Mileage (Sept 2008)
Whiteabbey A&E	1	32,073
	1	83,280
	4	184,746
	7	138,534

On 1 October 2008 you announced your intention to invest some £100 million over the next ten years to enable the 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 Northern Ireland Ambulance Service fleet estate, equipment and IT infrastructure. This will allow the purchase of some 60 A&E ambulances, 60 Patient Care Service (PCS) vehicles and 26 Rapid Response Vehicles (RRVs) over the next 3 years.

Maternity Services

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been invested in maternity services in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone constituency, in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 1196/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected at constituency level and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Alcohol and Tobacco Advertising

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the use of alcohol and tobacco advertising in sports.
(AQW 1205/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002 bans advertising and promotion (including sponsorship) of tobacco products, with certain limited exceptions. Under the terms of the UK Act, tobacco advertising in the print media and on billboards was prohibited from 14 February 2003, and direct mail and other promotions were banned by 14 May 2003. Tobacco sponsorship of sport ended on 31 July 2003 with only sponsorship of Formula One motor racing allowed to continue until July 2005. The Act extends to Northern Ireland.

Alcohol advertising and sponsorship is governed at the UK Level by a combination of legislation and self-regulation within the drinks industry to ensure that drink brands are not promoted as having the power to improve social or sexual success, or making the

drinker popular and attractive. The regulations also state that no marketing communications should use a medium to advertise alcoholic drinks if more than 25% of its audience is under 18 years of age.

Addressing young people's drinking is a key priority for my Department, but this is not an area the Department of Health can effectively tackle in isolation. We are therefore in the process of developing a cross-Departmental, integrated Young People's Drinking Action Plan.

The plan is looking at actions and measures that will impact positively on those factors associated with young people's use of alcohol. Among the factors being considered is the marketing of alcohol. In this respect, advertising in sports is a concern, and I intend to raise this issue with colleagues in Great Britain to see if the current codes can be strengthened, particularly in relation to protecting young people.

I intend that my Department will engage with the Department for Culture, Arts, and Leisure on the level of current alcohol sports sponsorship locally, and to identify if any non-legislative action could be taken on this issue.

Hospital-Acquired Infections

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans for (i) compensation packages for inpatients who contract hospital-acquired infections; and (ii) what additional assistance is provided to those inpatients left with permanent damage as a result of hospital-acquired infections.
(AQW 1219/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With regard to compensation and redress, I have no plans to put in place provisions that are specifically for healthcare-associated infections.

Claims management is devolved to the Health and Social Services Boards and the Health and Social Care Trusts, who have responsibility for the management, processing, settlement and outcome of clinical negligence claims. The Department meets the costs of these claims as they arise.

Hypothermia

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide, in the last 3 years, (i) the number of senior citizens treated in hospital for hypothermia; and (ii) the number of senior citizens who died, where hypothermia was a factor.
(AQW 1221/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The number of admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland for senior citizens¹ with a diagnosis of hypothermia².

Year	Admissions
2005	36
2006	42
2007 ³	30

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

- (ii) The registered number of deaths, to senior citizens¹, with a mention of hypothermia², Northern Ireland, 2005 to 2007^P.

Year	Deaths
2005	9
2006	9
2007 ^P	8

Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

- Senior citizens have been defined as persons of state pension age
 - Hypothermia is defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) code T68. Deaths were included where hypothermia was mentioned anywhere on the death certificate.
 - Information for 2007 is provisional and may be subject to change.
- P Data for 2007 remains provisional until the publication of the 2007 Annual Report of the Registrar General.

Health Service Dentists

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 455/09, to provide details of the Health Service dentists that are based in the (i) Cookstown; and (ii) Magherafelt District Council areas. (AQW 1223/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Health Service dentists that are based in the Cookstown District Council area

Initial	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
D F	Smyth	30a Fairhill Road, Cookstown	BT80 8AG	Cookstown
S	Miller	30a Fairhill Road, Cookstown	BT80 8AG	Cookstown
J	McHugh	30a Fairhill Road, Cookstown	BT80 8AG	Cookstown
O	McCloskey	17 Burn Road, Cookstown	BT80 8DN	Cookstown

Initial	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
C	Maguire	17 Burn Road, Cookstown	BT80 8DN	Cookstown
P M	Lenny	17 Burn Road, Cookstown	BT80 8DN	Cookstown
R J A	Nicholl	41 Oldtown Street, Cookstown	BT80 8EE	Cookstown
T	Kirk	12 Loy Street, Cookstown	BT80 8PE	Cookstown
P	Warwick	52 Loy Street, Cookstown	BT80 8PE	Cookstown

Source: Central Services Agency

- (ii) Health Service dentists that are based in the Magherafelt District Council area

Initial	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
R A J	Wallace	32 Rainey Street, Magherafelt	BT45 5AQ	Magherafelt
S R	Mcauley	32 Rainey Street, Magherafelt	BT45 5AQ	Magherafelt
C	Mcmullan	32 Rainey Street, Magherafelt	BT45 5AQ	Magherafelt
T R	Cassidy	36 King Street, Magherafelt	BT45 6AS	Magherafelt
M	Slevin	36 King Street, Magherafelt	BT45 6AS	Magherafelt
T	McCormick	11 Kirk Avenue, Magherafelt	BT45 6BT	Magherafelt
C A	Gormley	11 Kirk Avenue, Magherafelt	BT45 6BT	Magherafelt
R J	Craig	11 The Diamond Centre, Magherafelt	BT45 6EB	Magherafelt
L	Barr	11 The Diamond Centre, Magherafelt	BT45 6EB	Magherafelt
C	Gocher	11 The Diamond Centre, Magherafelt	BT45 6EB	Magherafelt
J T	Corry	Unit 18, The Diamond Centre, Magherafelt	BT45 6ED	Magherafelt
E	Corry	Unit 18, The Diamond Centre, Magherafelt	BT45 6ED	Magherafelt
P	Taylor	34 High Street, Draperstown, Magherafelt	BT45 7AA	Magherafelt
J	Black	35 High Street, Draperstown, Magherafelt	BT45 7AA	Magherafelt
T	Gates	36 High Street, Draperstown, Magherafelt	BT45 7AA	Magherafelt

Initial	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
D	Harvey	37 High Street, Draperstown, Magherafelt	BT45 7AA	Magherafelt
N	Mccord	Maghera Dental Care, 27 Church Street, Maghera	BT46 5EA	Magherafelt
M C	Gorman	Maghera Dental Care, 27 Church Street, Maghera	BT46 5EA	Magherafelt
L M	Henderson	Maghera Dental Care, 27 Church Street, Maghera	BT46 5EA	Magherafelt

Source: Central Services Agency

Note: Addresses given are those of the surgery at which the dentist is based, however these dentists may also work in surgeries located in other District Council Areas.

Osteoporosis

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any assessment has been made into (i) the cost of treating and preventing osteoporosis; and (ii) the impact that investment in this area would have on the reduction of fractures and cost to the Health Service of hip replacements. (AQW 1225/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007 a total of 227,000 prescriptions were dispensed in Northern Ireland for “Drugs Affecting Bone Metabolism” at a cost of £6,262,804. However, no estimate has been made of the current overall cost of treating osteoporosis in the Health and Social Care system as, from data currently available, it is not possible to differentiate between osteoporosis-related fractures and other fractures.

From 2008-09 my Department is introducing a new 3-year Directed Enhanced Service for the identification, assessment and treatment of osteoporosis among older people who have already suffered a fragility fracture. The new service will cost approximately £1m a year.

No estimate has been made of the cost of preventing osteoporosis in Northern Ireland or of the impact that such investment would have on the reduction of fractures and cost of hip replacements

Nursing Posts

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) specialist nurse; and (ii) falls and fractures liaison nurse, posts currently exist. (AQW 1226/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Information on the total number of specialist nurse posts is not available centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.
- (ii) Based on figures supplied by the Health & Social Care Trusts, there are 13 (13.0 whole-time equivalent) posts for falls and fractures liaison nurses.

Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) Scans

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scans have been commissioned by each Health and Social Services Board for (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; and (iii) 2008. (AQW 1227/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Service Boards generally commission specialty based services rather than specific procedures or diagnostic tests. Consequently it is not possible to provide information on the number of Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scans commissioned by each Health and Social Services Board.

Dual Energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) Scans

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scanners there are in each Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 1228/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) services are provided by Health and Social Care Trusts.

The number of Dual energy X-ray Absorptiometry (DXA) scanners in each Health and Social Care Trust are contained in the table below.

Health and Social Care Trust	No. of DXA scanners ¹
Belfast	2
Northern	0
Southern	1
South-Eastern	2
Western	2

Health and Social Care Trust	No. of DXA scanners ¹
Northern Ireland Total	7

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

1 – The number of DXA scanners as at 08/10/08.

Tobacco and Alcohol Advertising

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if tobacco and alcohol advertising should be banned within close proximity to schools. (AQW 1235/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of advertising potentially harmful substances in close proximity to schools is one that concerns me, and one we need to consider further. The current position relating to tobacco and alcohol advertising in respect of proximity to schools is as follows –

In respect of tobacco, under the terms of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002, tobacco advertising in the print media and on billboards was prohibited from 14 February 2003, and direct mail and other promotions were banned by 14 May 2003. This Act extends to Northern Ireland, and therefore this should not be an issue.

In respect of alcohol, currently advertising and sponsorship is governed at the UK Level by a combination of legislation and self-regulation within the drinks industry, to ensure that drink brands are not promoted at those aged under 18. The regulations also state that no marketing communications should use a medium to advertise alcoholic drinks if more than 25% of its audience is under 18 years of age.

I do have concerns about the marketing and promotion of alcohol in general and about the potential for such promotions to impact on children. I have already met with the drinks industry on a range of issues and the inappropriate marketing and promotion of alcohol is one I intend to pursue further with them. I shall also be raising this issue with colleagues in the UK to see how the current codes are being enforced and if they can be strengthened, particularly in relation to protecting our young people.

Playgrounds

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if smoking should be banned in playgrounds and other facilities that are primarily for the use of children. (AQW 1236/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Comprehensive controls on where

people may smoke were introduced on 30 April 2007 to protect the public from exposure to tobacco smoke in areas of premises or facilities that are enclosed or substantially enclosed.

There are no plans at present to ban smoking in outside areas such as playgrounds or other facilities that are used by children.

Armagh City Fire Station

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has for the present Armagh City Fire Station when the Fire Service moves to its new Loughgall Road premises in 2009. (AQW 1237/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The disposal of land which becomes surplus to its requirements is a matter for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. The Service, in common with any public body or its agencies is bound by Government directives that set criteria and due process for the Disposal of Surplus Property in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has invoked the disposal process for the present Armagh City Fire Station, which is currently ongoing.

Mental Health

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the projected percentage of his Department's budget that will be allocated to mental health in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 1246/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The projected percentage of my budget that will be allocated to mental health in each of the next three years is as follows

2008/2009	5.5%
2009/2010	5.5%
2010/2011	5.6%

Mental Health and Learning Disability

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many recommendations contained in the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability have been accepted and will be implemented by his Department. (AQW 1247/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The NI Executive has accepted the

broad thrust of the Bamford recommendations. Those recommendations that fall to my Department will be implemented as funding is made available and the appropriate workforce is in place.

Preschool Playgroups

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many preschool playgroups there are in (i) Belfast; and (ii) the East Belfast constituency. (AQW 1248/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format that you have requested.

Pharmacy Positions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many pharmacy positions are currently vacant in the Health Service. (AQW 1268/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies for Pharmacy staff, Radiographers, Physiotherapists and Consultants is published on the DHSSPS website within the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report.

Radiographer Positions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many radiographer positions are currently vacant in the Health Service. (AQW 1269/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies for Pharmacy staff, Radiographers, Physiotherapists and Consultants is published on the DHSSPS website within the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report.

Physiotherapy Positions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many physiotherapy positions are currently vacant in the Health Service. (AQW 1270/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies for Pharmacy staff, Radiographers, Physiotherapists and Consultants is published on the DHSSPS website

within the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report.

Senior Consultant Positions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many senior consultant positions are currently vacant in the Health Service. (AQW 1271/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies for Pharmacy staff, Radiographers, Physiotherapists and Consultants is published on the DHSSPS website within the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report.

Bamford Review

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what areas of the Bamford Review he intends to implement. (AQW 1272/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The NI Executive has accepted the broad thrust of the Bamford recommendations. Those recommendations that fall to my Department will be implemented as funding is made available and the appropriate workforce is in place.

Bamford Review

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the membership of the Experts Board set up by the Department to deal with the findings of the Bamford Review; and to confirm if members of the Federation of Experts by Experience have been included in that board. (AQW 1299/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I announced through a press release on 28 June 2007 the establishment and membership of the Board of Experts for Mental health and Learning Disability. The press release can be accessed on my Department's website at: www.dhsspsni.gov.uk. Membership of the Board has not changed.

Members of Federation of Experts by Experience have been invited to provide a service user perspective to the work of the Board of Experts for Mental Health and Learning Disability.

Domiciliary Packages

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many domiciliary packages have been provided in the North Down constituency, in the last year. (AQW 1316/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there are for all departments in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1322/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies by staff group and Trust can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report at 31st March 2008, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/psab_vacancy_survey_march_2008_web_report.pdf

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there are for all departments in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 1323/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies by staff group and Trust can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report at 31st March 2008, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/psab_vacancy_survey_march_2008_web_report.pdf

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there are for all departments in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1324/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies by staff group and Trust can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report at 31st March 2008, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/psab_vacancy_survey_march_2008_web_report.pdf

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there are for all departments in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1326/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies by staff group and Trust can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report at 31st March 2008, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/psab_vacancy_survey_march_2008_web_report.pdf

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many vacancies there are for all departments in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1327/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies by staff group and Trust can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Report at 31st March 2008, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/psab_vacancy_survey_march_2008_web_report.pdf

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff are employed in his Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1342/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are 10 staff employed in the Private Office plus the Special Adviser. The total salary cost for these staff for the 2007/08 financial year was £286,375. The salary cost for the period 1 April 2008 to 30 September 2008 was £151,621.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding is available from his Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1347/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department currently provides core funding for central administration costs to Home Start NI in its capacity as a regional voluntary organisation that provides training, information, guidance and support to 25 local schemes across Northern Ireland. In 2008/09 this funding will amount to £49,190.

We are also currently supporting four locally-based Home Start schemes which were previously funded through the Children's Fund – Home Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula, Home Start Down District, Home Start Newry and Mourne and Home Start Armagh and Dungannon. We will continue to fund these until March 2009. In 2008/09 the maximum amount of grant will be £187,633.

Free Residential Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made towards providing free residential care for the elderly. (AQW 1360/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Having considered the conclusions of the report I commissioned on foot of the Assembly debate last year on the cost of introducing free personal care for people in residential and nursing homes, I will make my position clear on this issue shortly. I should, however, clarify that free personal care would not mean completely free residential care, as residents would still be required to contribute to the costs of their food and accommodation. I would, however, remind the Member that, unlike the position in England and Wales, personal care to people at home (domiciliary care) is already, and always has been, free of charge in Northern Ireland.

Job Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the job vacancies in the Western Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 1361/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards at 31st March 2008 is given in Table 1 below. The low level of vacancies reflects the application of firm controls on the filling of posts when they fall vacant, given the need to do all that is possible to avoid compulsory redundancies as a consequence of the Review of Public Administration.

TABLE 1: VACANCIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARDS AT 31ST MARCH 2008

Board	Current Vacancies		Long-Term Vacancies	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Western Board	0	0.00	0	0.00
Eastern Board	0	0.00	0	0.00
Southern Board	1	1.00	1	1.00
Northern Board	1	0.43	1	0.43
Total	2	1.43	2	1.43

Source: NI HSC 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.

Job Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the job vacancies in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 1362/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards at 31st March 2008 is given in Table 1 below. The low level of vacancies reflects the application of firm controls on the filling of posts when they fall vacant, given the need to do all that is possible to avoid compulsory redundancies as a consequence of the Review of Public Administration.

TABLE 1: VACANCIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARDS AT 31ST MARCH 2008

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Eastern Board	0	0.00	0	0.00
Southern Board	1	1.00	1	1.00
Northern Board	1	0.43	1	0.43

Board	Current Vacancies		Long-Term Vacancies	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Total	2	1.43	2	1.43

Source: NI HSC 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.

Job Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the job vacancies in the Southern Health and Social Services Board.

(AQW 1364/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards at 31st March 2008 is given in Table 1 below. The low level of vacancies reflects the application of firm controls on the filling of posts when they fall vacant, given the need to do all that is possible to avoid compulsory redundancies as a consequence of the Review of Public Administration.

TABLE 1: VACANCIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARDS AT 31ST MARCH 2008

Board	Current Vacancies		Long-Term Vacancies	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
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Eastern Board	0	0.00	0	0.00
Southern Board	1	1.00	1	1.00
Northern Board	1	0.43	1	0.43
Total	2	1.43	2	1.43

Source: NI HSC 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.

Job Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the job vacancies in the Northern Health and Social Services Board.

(AQW 1365/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacancies in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards at 31st March 2008 is given in Table 1 below. The low level of vacancies reflects the application of firm controls on the filling of posts when they fall vacant, given the need to do all that is possible to avoid compulsory redundancies as a consequence of the Review of Public Administration.

TABLE 1: VACANCIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARDS AT 31ST MARCH 2008

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Northern Board	1	0.43	1	0.43
Total	2	1.43	2	1.43

Source: NI HSC 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.

TNF Blockers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been treated with TNF Blockers in each of the last 3 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 1369/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people treated with TNF Blockers in 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08 at each Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland is outlined in the table below.

Health and Social Care Trust	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Belfast	371	532	826
Northern	68	73	117
South-Eastern	42	70	102
Southern	10	39	52
Western	61	103	199
Total Northern Ireland	552	817	1,296

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

Note: Figures on the number of people treated each year represent a rolling total. For example a person who commenced treatment in 2005/06 and continued treatment into 2006/07 will be included in the total figure for both of these years.

TNF Blockers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for the (i) prescription; and (ii) allocation of, TNF Blockers in each of the last 3 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 1370/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average waiting time for the prescription and allocation of TNF blockers, in each of the last three years, is not collected centrally by the Department.

The Department commenced the collection of information on the number of patients with severe inflammatory arthritis awaiting treatment with TNF blockers earlier this year. Information on the number of such patients waiting to commence treatment with TNF blockers in each Health and Social Care Trust, and the length of time they had been waiting at 31st August 2008, is outlined in the table below.

Health and Social Care Trust	Waiting Time in Weeks					Total
	0 - 21	21 - 52	52 - 78	78 - 104	105+	
Belfast	103	107	85	34	5	334
Northern	31	33	23	28	3	118
Southern	6	10	8	5	0	29
South-Eastern	15	12	5	1	0	33
Western	14	20	0	1	0	35
Total Northern Ireland	169	182	121	69	8	549

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

The median waiting time band for the commencement of treatment with TNF blockers is > 21 to 52 weeks.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the annual cost to maintain his Departmental website. (AQW 1385/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for a number of websites which are maintained by Departmental staff who also undertake a range of other work. It is not possible to identify the specific costs related to website maintenance.

Preschool Playgroups

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the preschool playgroups that operate in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1410/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format that you have requested.

Home Care Workers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how (i) home help; and (ii) home care workers operate in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1411/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust employs 428 care workers in the North Down and Ards locality providing a wide range of services including help with personal care such as dressing and undressing as well assistance with shopping, laundry and other daily living tasks.

Home help and domiciliary care services are provided in the Ards locality to enable people to maintain independence and remain safely in their own homes. Services are allocated by way of an individual needs assessment which is carried out by a health or social care professional. If, after completion of a holistic assessment, needs are identified the Trust allocates the services which are necessary to meet those needs. Home help and domiciliary care workers are then allocated to service users to carry out those tasks.

Minor Ailments Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if all members of the public will qualify for the Minor Ailments Scheme, when prescription charges are abolished in April 2010. (AQW 1413/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Given that all patients in Northern Ireland will have access to free prescriptions from April 2010, my Department will be carrying out a review of the current scheme over the coming year to ensure it will remain manageable for community pharmacies to deliver and to provide value for money for the Health Service post April 2010.

The current arrangements for the provision of the Minor Ailments Scheme, including who may avail of it, will continue in the interim.

Loss of Nurses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a break down on the loss of nurses per Health and Social Care trust, under his planned efficiency savings, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1423/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Proposals for the planned efficiency savings put forward by HSC Trusts are just that and should not be read as the final position. Over the next five months each of the Trusts will consult on their respective key proposals. It is only after this period of consultation is over and final decisions are made that I will be in a position to provide you with this level of detail.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what job vacancies there are in the Fire Service. (AQW 1425/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Applications for retained (part time) firefighter posts at 11 locations are being processed and the closing date for applications for retained firefighter posts at eight other locations was 16 October. There are nine support staff posts at three locations, and two support staff posts at Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters will be advertised shortly. Job vacancies in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service are routinely advertised on their website and in the media

Ambulance Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what job vacancies there are in the Ambulance Service. (AQW 1426/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has advised that its front-line emergency and non-emergency workforce is currently the equivalent of 21.73 posts under-strength.

Department Job Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what job vacancies there are in his Department. (AQW 1427/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The job vacancies in the Department (i.e. those which are being filled through external recruitment) are as follows:

General Service administrative vacancies	10
Specialist vacancies such as medical, accountancy, social services:	23

Recruitment competitions for a number of the above vacancies have reached the stage of successful candidates being notified but are prior to acceptance of offer.

Other vacancies exist in the Department but are either being filled via internal NICS processes or are on hold in line with the Public Service Commission's Guiding Principles for the handling of vacancies in RPA-affected areas or due to restructuring as part of the NICS Reform Initiatives.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on the classification in Northern Ireland, of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. (AQW 1434/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In January 2008 my Department issued a circular endorsing National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) clinical guideline 53 on the diagnosis and management of ME/CFS in adults and children. Page 4 of the clinical guideline discusses the aetiology of ME/CFS and indicates that the World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies ME/CFS as a neurological illness (G93.3). Clinicians use the WHO International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) for epidemiological, health management and clinical purposes.

NICE clinical guideline 53 can be found at:

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/index.jsp?action=download&o=36194.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on the resources and facilities for treating Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in (i) the Belfast Health and Social Trust; and (ii) the rest of Northern Ireland. (AQW 1435/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is currently no cure for myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) and no specific treatment for the condition, although drugs and other therapies may be provided to help patients manage its symptoms. People suffering from ME/CFS in Northern Ireland have access to treatment from appropriate sections of the health service depending on the severity of their illness. The variability of symptoms in patients means that individual patients may need to access different disciplines of the health service. These may include GP care, community care and support, neurology services and mental health services which can provide treatment like cognitive behaviour therapy, which is thought to help manage the illness.

A specialist ME/CFS clinic for the treatment of adults with mild to moderate symptoms is delivered at Belfast City Hospital by a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on the current and future plans for treatment of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. (AQW 1436/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is the responsibility of the Health and Social Services Boards to plan and allocate resources to meet the needs of their local population, including those with myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS). In determining their priorities for service development, Boards will take into account local circumstances, the strategic objectives established for the HSC and competing demands and pressures for a wide range of health and social care services generally.

In January 2008 my Department issued a circular endorsing a National Institute for Health and Clinical

Excellence (NICE) clinical guideline on the diagnosis and management of ME/CFS in adults and children. I would expect the HSC to take account of the NICE guideline in the future planning and delivery of services to people diagnosed with ME/CFS.

Personality Disorders

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on current treatments for personality disorders. (AQW 1437/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Personality disorders present in different ways. Whilst there is currently no service dedicated to the treatment of personality disorders, nevertheless, many healthcare services respond to the needs of these people with the resources that are available. Where specialist intervention is required Trusts are able to make referrals to inpatient services in GB.

Personality Disorders

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his future plans for the treatments of personality disorders. (AQW 1438/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently developing a strategy which will identify how dedicated services for Personality Disorders can best be taken forward in line with the recommendations of the Bamford Report.

Category M Payments

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why category M payments are being withheld from pharmaceutical contractors. (AQW 1440/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Category M payments are not being, and have never been, withheld from community pharmacists. Indeed, in May 2008 my officials made the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC) an offer in writing of immediate relief funding, together with an offer to negotiate an agreed settlement for Category M payments for the 2007-08 year. These offers were rejected by the PCC who preferred to take the matter to judicial review.

I am pleased to say, however, that PCC have now accepted this offer. The judicial review will, however, proceed in connection with the appropriateness of using Category M arrangements, which my Department is

already openly committed to replacing, in relation to pharmacy pay in Northern Ireland.

Access NI

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to expedite clearance by Access NI for mental health nurses seeking employment. (AQW 1487/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I introduced interim arrangements in August 2008 to help alleviate the problems experienced by health and social care employers as a result of AccessNI delays. The interim arrangements were introduced in a way which attempted to balance the risks associated with the disruption to services with the potential risks to vulnerable patients and clients. In addition, I have written to Minister Paul Goggins, who has responsibility for AccessNI, to press for urgent action to bring AccessNI back to full service. My officials are currently working closely with NIO officials and Trust Human Resource Managers to identify those areas within health and social care, which are most seriously impacted by AccessNI delays.

Recruitment of Nurses

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what payments have been made to agencies for the recruitment of nurses, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1488/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in respect of the above for the period of 05/06 to 06/07 is available on the Department's website at the following link:

<http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm>

Information for the 07/08 period is being finalised and will be published on the website shortly.

Payments to Nurses

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the difference is between payments to nurses employed directly by Health and Social Care Trusts, and those employed by agencies. (AQW 1489/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Nurses employed by HSC Trusts are paid according to the Agenda for Change Banding attributed to their particular post. Bandings are determined on the basis of job weight as measured by the NHS Job

Evaluation Scheme. Payments to nurses employed by agencies are a matter for individual agencies.

Agency Nurses

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional money has each Health and Social Care Trust has had to pay as a result of nurses being employed by agencies. (AQW 1491/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in respect of the above for the period of 05/06 to 06/07 is available on the Department's website at the following link:

<http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm>

Information for the 07/08 period is being finalised and will be published on the website shortly

Nursing Posts

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many mental health nursing posts are included in the proposed reduction of nursing posts. (AQW 1492/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The reductions in the number of nursing staff are not broken down by nursing branch. I have indicated that service development in mental health services is a priority and as such will attract investment over the next three years.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many hoax calls were received by the Fire and Rescue Service in the South Belfast constituency in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1584/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is given in the table below:

2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008
517	383	341	255	219

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service publishes a range of statistics, including mobilisation in response to hoax calls, on their website (www.nifrs.org).

People Visually Impaired

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are registered as (i) partially sighted; and (ii) visually impaired. (AQW 1684/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current statistics for people with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. (AQW 1832/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2006/07, there were 50 admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland where a diagnosis of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis was recorded.

Deaths and discharges are used to approximate admissions. These figures do not equate to individuals as a person may be admitted to hospital more than once in a year or across a number of years.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Concessionary Smartpass Holders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the extension of the half-fare entitlement to Concessionary Smartpass holders, to include return and single fares. (AQW 1218/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): Officials from my Department have been in discussions with Translink regarding the ability of concessionary Smartpass holders to obtain return tickets. They are currently working on a scheme that could allow holders the option to obtain return tickets for rail travel.

Water Levels in Clay Lough

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what assistance he is giving to householders on the Clay Road, Killyleagh, whose water supply has been affected by the falling water levels in the Clay Lough, Killyleagh. (AQW 1231/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has no

responsibility for water levels in Clay Lough or any private water supply arrangements from the Lough for properties at Clay Road, Killyleagh.

There have been no reports of interruptions to the drinking water supply for properties at Clay Road and Northern Ireland Water is satisfied that the water infrastructure in the area is operating normally.

Parking Spaces in Dungiven

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to provide additional parking spaces in Dungiven, for people wishing to use the Translink Belfast Express bus service. (AQW 1250/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is in negotiations with the Western Education and Library Board, for the purchase of part of the former Dungiven Primary School site, to provide a Park and Ride car park facility for users of the Belfast express bus service in Dungiven. This would provide approximately 140 parking spaces, but the success of this proposal will be dependent on the availability of funding.

Drainage and Foul Water Systems

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans the Department has to upgrade the storm drainage and foul water systems in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1257/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it recently carried out several sewerage projects in the North Down constituency and has plans for more work to continue to improve the drainage in the area. Recent sewerage projects have been completed in High Street, Comber and Castle Street, Bangor. In addition, a major project is about to start in the Ballyholme area to upgrade the sewers and pumping stations as part of the Bangor Drainage Area Plan.

Northern Ireland Water is in the process of carrying out drainage area plans across all constituencies in the North including North Down. The remaining elements of the Plan for Bangor and indeed for all other areas in North Down are being progressively implemented on a prioritised basis taking account of customer requirements, regulatory demands and available funding.

Footpaths

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps his Department took to

address the growth of weeds and grass on footpaths and roads during the summer; and what will he do to ensure a more prompt response should bad weather persist. (AQW 1278/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In my response to the Member's recent Assembly Question AQW 8700/08, I advised that my Department's Roads Service normally control weed growth in rural areas, by mowing roadside verges, prior to the weed flowering/seeding season, between May and June. A second cut is normally undertaken at the end of the summer.

Chemical control of weeds is undertaken for kerbed and paved areas and is normally carried out on an annual basis in the spring, with any significant re-growth being dealt with as necessary by selective spraying.

SUSTRANS

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to ensure that funding for SUSTRANS is continued beyond March 2009. (AQW 1279/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department does not provide grant funding to Sustrans. In the past Sustrans has been engaged by my Department to carry out work on a consultancy basis, in accordance with Department of Finance and Personnel guidelines. No agreement is currently in place.

Sewerage Systems

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) when the assessment of the sewerage systems in Killyleagh will be finalised and; (ii) when will the much needed improvements take place. (AQW 1280/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that an initial scoping study of the Killyleagh sewerage network is currently on-going and is programmed for completion this financial year.

The outcome from this study will determine the extent of any problems and if necessary initiate a full scale Drainage Area Study. Any capital projects arising from the Drainage Area Study would be scheduled for commencement in 2010/11 subject to funding and competing priorities.

Fares on Public Transport

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to reducing fares on public transport, given the fall in the

price of petrol and diesel since the last fares increase. (AQW 1288/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The level of fares is commercial decision for Translink. Translink buys fuel in advance and for fixed periods of time. This process is known as hedging and means that fares can more readily be set and held as the price of fuel fluctuates up and down. However, fuel is only one of the costs which impacts on fares.

Department's Investment Plans

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) his Department's investment plans for the North Down constituency for the next 5 years; and (ii) the projects to be delivered, including the dates for completion. (AQW 1313/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is currently implementing the recently published Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) for roads, which outlines a £3.1 billion programme of capital investment in roads throughout the North over the next ten years that will transform the strategic road network. Although this is the largest ever programme of investment in our roads system, resources are finite and priorities have had to be made. The prioritisation of proposed schemes has been made in line with guidance contained in the Regional Transportation Strategy and supporting Transport Plans.

The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) 2015 identifies a hierarchy of roads within the regional network comprising, key transport corridors, link corridors and then the remainder of the trunk road network. National transportation priorities embracing the Government's five key criteria of economics, safety, environment, integration and accessibility are also taken into account.

Although no major schemes are identified in the IDP within the North Down constituency, the accessibility of North Down will be improved when works to the Westlink and M2 are complete. Proposals for major improvements to the A2 Sydenham Bypass, A55 Knock Road and the grade separation of the York Street junction, will also create benefits for North Down.

The ongoing programme of Local Transport and Safety Measures will be rolled forward in conjunction with key stakeholders including North Down Borough Council.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that it will invest £8.7 million on water and sewerage projects in the North Down area and will be completed during the two year period up to March 2011. The table below lists the projects involved and the proposed dates for completion.

Financial Year 2009/10	
Project	Completion Date
Inglewood Park, Bangor, Storm Sewer	May 2009
Demesne Road, Holywood, Storm and Foul Sewer	May 2009
Hamilton Road, Bangor, Storm Sewer	July 2009
Hollywood Zone Watermain Improvements	August 2009
Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works	October 2009
Ballyholme Drainage Area Plan (Phase 1)	October 2009
Financial Year 2010/11	
Project	Completion Date
Lukes Point (Bangor) Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	February 2011

Projects for future years will be dependent on the outcome of the price control review in 2010, following which, a prioritised programme of capital work will be developed.

Translink has advised that they plan to deliver the following projects within the next 5 years, subject to the availability of funding:-

- Replacement of the Bangor Line Train Describing Machine, a signalling mechanism which controls train movements on the Belfast to Bangor line – estimated for completion June 2009.
- Plans to develop Park & Ride facilities at Bangor. Current target completion date is April 2013, although this will be dependent on land issues.

In addition to these projects Translink intends to purchase new trains, the first of which should be in service by 2012. It is planned to deploy five of these trains, the cost of which would be in the region of £25 million, in the greater Belfast area to increase the frequency and capacity of services. Those living in the North Down area will be able to benefit from these additional trains when they are introduced to service.

Engineering Contracts

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how procurement is carried out for engineering contracts issued for (i) Translink and (ii) Northern Ireland Railways. (AQW 1331/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Railways, Ulsterbus and Citybus operate together under the brand name Translink. The same procurement standards are applied to all contracts in Northern Ireland Railways as to the other Translink companies to enable a consistent approach.

Translink is a Centre of Procurement Expertise (CoPE) appointed and monitored by the Procurement Board for Northern Ireland. Translink as a CoPE must satisfy a set level of procurement competency against set criteria which include Best Value for Money, Best Practice, People Procurement Expertise and Regulatory Compliance. Translink is expected to comply with best practice principles for public procurement.

For the purposes of procurement legislation, Translink is a Public Utility and therefore operates under and applies the Utilities Contracts Regulations 2006. This legislation states how procurement is to be carried out over certain threshold values which at 1st January 2008 are:

- Services/ Supplies £279,785 (Total value of contract)
- Works £3,497,313 (Total value of contract)

The above contracts are subject to the procedures in the regulations including the requirements to be advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU).

Procurement requirements for items over an estimated value of £30,000 are also advertised on the Translink website to enable open competition and the same standards are used to pre-qualify, invite to tender and evaluate submitted tenders; all of which is subject to an approval process.

Further information on Translink tenders and procurement policy can be found on their website.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development what funding is available from his Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1351/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: None.

Door to Door Transport Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the usage of the door to door transport scheme, in the North Down area. (AQW 1356/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Door-to-Door Transport Scheme began in the North Down Borough Council area on 23 February 2007. Between 23 February 2007 and 30 September 2008, a total number of 16,463 trips were taken by members of the scheme in the North Down area.

Motor Home Service Units

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress with providing road signage for motor home service units. (AQW 1366/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Following a request to provide signing to a Motorhome Service Point at Houston's Mill, Broughshane, my Department's Roads Service authorised and erected new signing in 2006.

Roads Service has advised that since then, only two applications have been received for similar signing. These requests relate to facilities in car parks at Carrickfergus and Whitehead. Initial sign designs have been completed and a plan indicating sign locations is currently being prepared. These proposals will then be submitted to Carrickfergus Borough Council for final agreement on design, location and costs of the signs, following which, Roads Service will then erect the signs.

Cycling and Walking Routes

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department has taken to develop cycling and walking routes in the (a) Dunmurry; (b) Colin; (c) North Lisburn; and (d) South Lisburn areas; what plans his Department has to provide additional routes in these areas, including a timescale for the implementation of any new routes. (AQW 1373/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the programmes of cycle and walking facilities are largely based on the proposals contained within the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. Within the Lisburn City Council area it has introduced a total of 35 km of cycle lanes, 7 km of which have been delivered within the past 3 years.

The table below details the works which have been carried out in recent years to improve walking routes in the subject areas:

District	Works Carried Out
Dunmurry	Dropped kerbs in Glenburn Road, Kingsway, Dunmurry Lane and Ulster Avenue
Colin	Junction improvements at McKinsty Road/Derriaghy Road Junction and footway upgrade between Derriaghy Road and Stewartstown Road
Lisburn	Dropped kerbs in Antrim Street, Antrim Road, Pond Park Road, Drumard Drive, Rushmore and Knockburn Drive

At present works are currently on-site to upgrade:

- the Pelican crossing at Bentrin Road;

- the footway on Sloan Street; and
- the junction at Sloan Street/Mercer Street, which will incorporate a new controlled crossing at Gregg Street

I can also advise that the following further footway/cycleway works have been included in the works programme for this financial year:

- footway widening to facilitate shared pedestrian/cycle use on Stewartstown Road between McKinsty Road; and
- Lagmore Avenue signalisation of the Stewartstown Rd / Lagmore Dale junction.

In addition to these works, proposals are currently being developed for improved pedestrian facilities on Smithfield Street, and it is hoped that these works will also be carried out within the current financial year

Unadopted Roads

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development pursuant to his answer to AQW 4821/08 to (i) provide an updated list of unadopted roads in the South Antrim constituency and (ii) to detail which roads listed in AQW 4821/08 have been adopted since this list was originally produced. (AQW 1375/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has compiled the following updated list of roads in the South Antrim area that remain unadopted, and are subject to Private Streets Order Legislation:

- The Oaks, Church Road, Randalstown
- Bramblewood, Ballytromery Road, Crumlin
- Glenoak Grange Close, Nutts Corner Road, Crumlin
- Millmount, Bridge Street, Randalstown
- Old Mill, Dunadry Road, Dunadry
- The Brambles, Craigstown Road, Randalstown
- Spire Way, Moneyglass
- Castle Lodge, Castle Road, Randalstown

Between Castle Drive and Ashdale, Castle Road, Randalstown

- Edgewood, Moylena Road, Antrim
- St James Meadow, Cidercourt Road, Crumlin
- Millhouse Village, Stiles Way, Antrim
- Greenvale, Belmont Road, Antrim
- Birchdale, Portglenone Road, Randalstown
- The Mews, Cidercourt Road, Crumlin
- Ballytromery Avenue, Ballytromery Road, Crumlin
- Riveroaks, Mill Road, Crumlin
- Carnbeg, Kilbegs Road, Antrim
- Millwater Lodge, Mill Street, Crumlin

- Grangers Mill, Seven Mile Straight, Muckamore
- Junction One, Ballymena Road, Antrim
- Cherrygrove, Belfast Road, Antrim
- Millview, Clonboy Walk, Randalstown
- Castle Avenue, Castle Road, Randalstown
- Bushforde, Steeple Road, Antrim – Phase 1
- Bushforde, Steeple Road, Antrim – Phase 2
- Maple Park, Lurgan Road, Crumlin
- Glencraig Manor, Springfarm Road, Antrim
- The Cedars, Cunningham Way, Antrim
- Bleach Green, Islandreagh Drive, Dunadry
- Main Street, Crumlin
- Dublin Road, Antrim
- Fox Lodge, Dunadry
- Niblock Oaks, Niblock Road, Antrim
- Lamonts Mill, Riverside, Antrim
- Moylena Court, Cunningham Way, Antrim
- Ballymena Road (south dualling), Antrim
- Internal Roads, Junction One, Antrim
- Main Street, Toomebridge
- Bush Road, Antrim
- Main Street, Glenavy
- Glebecoole Park, Carnmoney
- Fernridge, Ballycraigy
- Sally Gardens, Ballyclare Road
- Ashford Lodge, Ballyclare Road
- The Beeches, Mallusk
- Michelin Road, Mallusk
- Milewater Way, Mossley
- Plantation Avenue, Ballyclare
- Hawthorn Way, Ballyclare
- Green Road, Ballyclare
- Village Green, Ballyclare

(ii) The following roads detailed in AQW 4821/08 have been adopted since this list was originally produced.

- Huntingdale, Ballyclare
- Lodge Row, Mallusk

In addition to these roads, 10 bonds out of a total of 15 at Greenvale, Belmont Road, Antrim have also been adopted.

If the Member requires any further information for a particular development, he may contact my officials in Roads Service.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the annual cost to maintain his Departmental website. (AQW 1384/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's web publishing is the responsibility of individual directorates, with each branch maintaining their own pages on the DRD website. A wide range of grades spend different percentages of their time on this activity and it is not possible to easily identify the specific costs involved.

As with other NICS websites the main DRD site is hosted and paid for by DFP's Delivery and Innovation Division (DID).

Costs incurred for services delivered via the website by DRD in the financial year 2007/08 totalled £25,413. This comprised Trafficwatch (at £10,500), Travelwise (at £7,000) and a combined cost of £ 7,913 for a range of online services such as Door-to-Door Transport and the Blue Badge Scheme.

Cycle Path

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate what monetary contribution his Department and its agencies have made to the recently constructed cycle path on the Newtownards Road between Philip Way and Copeland Crescent, Comber. (AQW 1393/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As you are aware, a series of cycle paths have been constructed from the Stage 2 Comber Bypass, along the Newtownards Road towards Darragh Road.

The most recent section, from Copeland Crescent to Philip Way was completed by my Department's Roads Service in March 2008, at a total cost of £60,270.

Bypass for Ballynahinch

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on a bypass for Ballynahinch. (AQW 1394/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Ballynahinch Bypass project is included in my Department's Investment Delivery Plan for Roads, which was published earlier this year.

Subject to satisfactory progression through economic appraisal and the normal statutory procedures, and the availability of funding, delivery is anticipated in the latter half of the plan period, i.e., between 2013/14 and 2017/18.

Work to develop this strategic road improvement scheme is being progressed in three stages:

- An initial Stage 1 assessment, required to confirm the feasibility of the proposal, has been completed;
- A Stage 2 assessment, which will lead to the selection of a preferred route, is currently nearing completion and;
- A Stage 3 assessment, when the preferred route will be further developed to provide a specimen design, which will be the subject of comprehensive environmental, economic and engineering assessment.

The Ballynahinch Bypass proposal attracted a number of objections when the draft Ards/Down Area Plan 2015 was published for public comment. The public inquiry into the draft plan has been completed and the outcome is awaited.

Once the outcome of this public inquiry, in relation to the Ballynahinch Bypass is known, Roads Service intends to bring the emerging proposals for the Bypass to preliminary public consultation before concluding the stage 2 assessment and confirming the preferred route.

In the interim, work considered essential to assist subsequent scheme development and progress it through the Statutory Procedures is continuing. A preliminary ground investigation survey for the scheme has recently been completed. In addition to this, initial consultations along with the work required to undertake a comprehensive environmental assessment, including the collection of background information, is currently ongoing.

Belfast to Dublin Railway Line

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate how his Department intends to upgrade the Belfast to Dublin railway line and increase the frequency of the service. (AQW 1396/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink and Ianrod Éireann are currently carrying out work to examine options for upgrading the Belfast to Dublin rail service, looking at the costs and benefits involved. I will be considering this work with my southern counterpart within the mechanism of the North South Ministerial Council, having regard to the budgeting context.

Work started in February of this year to construct a new railway station at Newry at a cost of £14.6m. In addition, planning is underway to relay an 11 mile stretch of the track between Knockmore and Lurgan, with work programmed to start in 2009. Current indications are that this project would cost in the region of £55m. My Department has also approved a £950,000 capital programme to overhaul the Enterprise

Trains. The new corporate livery for the service has been completed, and work on various engineering and safety measures is being undertaken.

A1 Belfast to Newry Road

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the time scale for the completion of the dualling of the A1 Belfast to Newry road. (AQW 1397/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the construction of the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme is being undertaken as part of a Design Build Finance and Operate contract.

The contractor is Amey Lagan Roads Limited, and their current programme indicates that the new stretch of dual carriageway will be open to traffic by winter 2010.

EWAY Rapid Transit Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline where the park and ride facilities for the proposed EWAY rapid transit scheme are to be sited. (AQW 1403/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: A Park & Ride site for the EWAY Rapid Transit Scheme has been identified in the Millmount area of Dundonald. The exact location is contained within the draft BMAP (Map 2A) and also on page 305 for the Rapid Transit Strategic Outline Case, both of which can be found in the Assembly Library.

Cutting Grass

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure his Department or its contractors clean up after cutting grass, in accordance with health and safety standards. (AQW 1432/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service policy and procedures for grass cutting and verge maintenance have been developed for safety reasons, to prevent overgrowth onto the carriageway and footway surfaces and the obstruction of sightlines and traffic signs. As the type of equipment required for the collection and removal of grass cuttings would increase costs significantly, the cuttings are not lifted. Roads Service does, however, endeavour to ensure that grass cuttings are not left on the surface of any footway, or carriageway, in the vicinity of the areas that have been cut.

Landscaping

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development when the remaining piece of landscaping, fronting 80 Main Street in Limavady, will be completed. (AQW 1439/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they had initially intended to grass the area in front of 80 Main Street in Limavady, following a traffic management scheme. However, during the original works it was noticed that a lot of pedestrians used the area, and it would therefore have been difficult to establish and maintain the grass. The Roads Service contractor has now been instructed to pave this area, and has promised to complete the work by early November.

Collision Histories

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the collision histories in relation to locations where traffic-calming measures have been introduced, since January 2000. (AQW 1447/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has published the Road Safety Engineering Report for 2001/02 to 2005/06, which details the engineering measures, including collision histories, undertaken within the Collision Remedial and Traffic-Calming programme of works. The report can be viewed at www.roadsni.gov.uk/roadsafetyengreport0405-0506.pdf, and details of the collision histories can be found at pages 37-46 of the report.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5280/09, to detail the amount of money spent by Translink on fuel for (i) trains; and (ii) buses, in (a) 2007-08; and (b) 2008-09 to date. (AQW 1452/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have provided the following information.

	Northern Ireland Railways	Buses
2007/08	£4,590,598	£22,616,223
Six month period ending September 2008	£2,818,928	£13,186,400

Road Traffic Accidents

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, since January 2000, the number of (i) serious injuries; and (ii) deaths, caused as a result of road traffic accidents at locations where traffic-calming measures have been introduced, 3 years (a) prior to; and (b) after, their introduction. (AQW 1454/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they do not collate accident statistics of severe injuries or deaths at locations where traffic-calming measures have been introduced. However, the table below details the total number of serious injuries and deaths caused as a result of roads traffic accidents across the North between January 2000 and December 2007.

Year	Start Date	End Date	Accident Count	No of Fatalities	No of Serious Injuries
2000	1 January 2000	31 December 2000	8388	171	1786
2001	1 January 2001	31 December 2001	7447	148	1682
2002	1 January 2002	31 December 2002	6784	150	1526
2003	1 January 2003	31 December 2003	6049	150	1289
2004	1 January 2004	31 December 2004	5634	147	1183
2005	1 January 2005	31 December 2005	4948	135	1073
2006	1 January 2006	31 December 2006	5628	126	1216
2007	1 January 2007	31 December 2007	5990	113	1097

The Road Safety Engineering Report for 2001/02 to 2005/06, which shows the road traffic accident history prior to and after the introduction of traffic-calming measures, can be viewed at www.roadsni.gov.uk/roadsafetyengreport0405-0506.pdf

Northern Ireland Water

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development how many people are employed by Northern Ireland Water, broken down by council area. (AQW 1463/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has 1,720 employees, and the breakdown by council area is as follows:-

Council Area	Number of Niw Employees
Antrim Borough Council	52
Ards Borough Council	2

Council Area	Number of Niw Employees
Armagh City and District Council	53
Ballymena Borough Council	175
Ballymoney Borough Council	13
Banbridge District Council	15
Belfast City Council	678
Carrickfergus Borough Council	10
Castlereagh Borough Council	3
Coleraine Borough Council	48
Cookstown District Council	5
Craigavon Borough Council	85
Derry City Council	167
Down District Council	42
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	15
Fermanagh District Council	54
Limavady Borough Council	6
Lisburn City Council	57
Magherafelt District Council	43
Newry and Mourne District Council	74
Newtownabbey Borough Council	3
North Down Borough Council	48
Omagh District Council	59
Strabane District Council	13

Traffic Flows

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average daily traffic flows on (i) Donegall Road; (ii) Lisburn Road (lower) (iii) Tates Avenue; (iv) Eglantine Avenue; and (v) Ulsterville Avenue. (AQW 1466/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service collects data from approx 300 automatic traffic counting sites located across the North's road network. I can advise the Member that none of the automatic traffic counting sites are currently located in the areas that you are interested in. Therefore, it is not possible to provide current average daily traffic flows for the roads you have requested.

Parking Tickets

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of parking

tickets issued by NCP, for each month from June to September 2008 for North, South, East; and West Belfast; and (ii) the revenue generated. (AQW 1479/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that figures for Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in Belfast are not held on a regional basis. The number of PCNs issued in Belfast for the months requested are as follows:-

June 2008	July 2008	August 2008	September 2008
3556	3356	3310	3896

Revenue generated from PCN income is not collated on a city, town or regional basis. However, the total amount of PCN income, for the requested four month period, across the North was £1.7M.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what measures have been implemented by Northern Ireland Water, for ongoing sewage problems at Ardmeen Green, Downpatrick. (AQW 1484/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a new chemical dosing regime was introduced at Ballynagross Wastewater Pumping Station to address the concerns of residents about malodours in the Ardmeen Green area of Downpatrick. An extended odour monitoring exercise has indicated that the new dosing regime has been successful in reducing malodours in the area.

Road Safety Schemes

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development how many road safety schemes, with flashing warning lights, have been completed for primary schools in (i) Larne; and (ii) Carrickfergus. (AQW 1494/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a safety scheme to provide a Pelican pedestrian crossing on the Old Glenarm Road, Larne was introduced this year. This will improve safety on the routes to both Larne High School and Moyle Primary School from the local large housing areas, including Greenland Walk and Greenland Drive, to the east of Old Glenarm Road.

I can also advise that road safety schemes with flashing lights are being installed at the following primary schools in the current financial year:

- Corran Integrated Primary School, Old Glenarm Road, Larne
- Ballyboley Primary School, Braepark Road, Larne.

With regard to the Carrickfergus council area, I can advise that Whitehead Primary School had a road safety scheme installed last financial year, which incorporates flashing lights.

Coach Parking Facilities

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the commitment to tourism within the Programme for Government, and Derry City Council's commitment to ensure that visitor numbers increase to 203,000 per annum by 2009, what steps he is taking to provide adequate and secure coach parking facilities in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 1495/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the provision of adequate and secure coach parking facilities for tourist coaches, is not their responsibility. Consequently Roads Service has no plans to provide any secure coach parking facilities in Derry.

However, local councils may provide secure coach parking as part of their tourism strategy, or arrange with Translink or other operators to use their facilities. I understand that Derry City Council, through the Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau, has arrangements in place for secure parking of tourist coaches within the city.

Traffic Lanes

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to straighten the traffic lanes that have been altered due to construction work along Victoria Street and around Custom House Square, to reduce the risk of traffic accidents. (AQW 1499/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The developer of the recently constructed Victoria Square development was required to realign traffic lanes on Victoria Street, in order to ensure that vehicular and pedestrian traffic continued to operate satisfactorily, when the development's new car park access at Victoria Street became operational.

It is often difficult to achieve normal alignment standards in the urban situation, where building lines are fixed. While the Victoria Street road alignment is slightly skewed at the Ann Street junction, this is the best alignment that could be achieved without adversely affecting junction capacity. The arrangement has been

in place for several years and appears to be operating satisfactorily.

In the longer term, Roads Service is developing proposals for the management of traffic in the city centre, as indicated in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015. Traffic movements in Victoria Street will be part of this overall study. This work, which is at a very early stage, will be subject to statutory processes and the availability of finances.

There are temporary lane restrictions in place to facilitate on-going construction works at Donegall Quay, as part of the Belfast Sewers project. When these works are complete, the restrictions will be removed.

Water Supply Disconnections

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how many water supply disconnections have taken place this year as a result of overdue accounts not being paid. (AQW 1500/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that since 1 January 2008 it has disconnected the water supply to 18 non-domestic customers as a result of unpaid accounts.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how many disconnection of supply notices have been issued by Northern Ireland Water since 1 January 2008. (AQW 1501/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that since 1 January 2008 it has issued 151 water supply disconnection notices to non-domestic customers.

Traffic Calming

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has for new traffic-calming measures in Millisle. (AQW 1504/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service receives many requests for traffic-calming schemes and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established.

All proposals for Traffic-Calming schemes which might be undertaken by Roads Service are assessed, scored and prioritised within each Council area. Roads Service then draws up a two-year rolling programme, which is published each year in the Autumn Roads Service Report presented to Councils. This programme

may be subject to change, depending on the assessed priority of new requests for traffic calming.

I can advise that Roads Service does not have any current plans for new traffic-calming measures in Millisle, as any recently assessed schemes in Millisle have not scored highly enough to merit inclusion in the current two year programme.

Newtownstewart Bypass

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development if all the landowners of land purchased to build the Newtownstewart By-Pass have been paid. (AQW 1513/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the majority of land owners on the Newtownstewart Bypass project have been paid. There are currently 5 cases which have not been finalised. In each of these cases, Roads Service is awaiting further information or clarification of outstanding issues from the landowners and/or their representatives.

Flooding in the Merok/Cregagh Area

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made to prevent further flooding in the Merok/Cregagh area of East Belfast. (AQW 1530/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that remedial works have recently been completed in Merok Crescent, to increase the capacity of the road drainage and further works are currently under consideration for Merok Drive.

Roads Service are also continuing to undertake investigations and liaise with other organisations, to determine what further remedial work is required to address the risk of flooding in the Merok/Cregagh area.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that a drainage area study is underway in East Belfast, to assess the adequacy of the sewerage system and identify parts that need to be upgraded. The information gathered during the flooding in August 2008 is also being incorporated into this study, which is scheduled for completion during 2009. Any recommended sewer improvements will be prioritised by Northern Ireland Water and included in its capital works programme, subject to the availability of funding.

Potholes

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department (i) paid out as compensation for damage to vehicles caused by potholes; and (ii) spent on repairing potholes, in each of the last 5 years, broken down by council area. (AQW 1549/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain a central register of the information that you have requested by council area. However, I am able to provide you with the expenditure on repairing defects, which include potholes, at Roads Service Divisional level. This is detailed at Table 1 below.

The compensation paid for damages to vehicles caused by potholes is detailed by Roads Service Section Office area (Table 2 below). The Section Office areas roughly correlate to District Council areas.

The Information provided in each table relates to each of the last 5 years.

TABLE 1

Roads Service	Expenditure £k ¹				
	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
Northern Division	3757	4145	4399	4259	4731
Southern Division	4486	4634	4782	4953	5021
Eastern Division	3881	4434	4733	4985	5650
Western Division	5556	5435	5219	5256	5309

1. Recorded expenditure in relation to carriageway and footway patching repairs (all patching repairs)

Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all the work being carried out by (i) Roads Service; and (ii) Northern Ireland Water, in the South Antrim constituency during October 2008. (AQW 1571/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that during October 2008 work will continue on the M2 Improvement Scheme between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions. The main elements of this scheme that will be undertaken during October will include:

- concreting the deck of Colin Bridge;
- strengthening the wing walls and parapet of Bellevue Bridge; and

- construction of the M2 central reserve barrier.

Work will also be undertaken to modify the bus gate at the bottom of the M2 off-slip at Sandyknowes Junction, and to alter road markings on Sandyknowes Roundabout.

- In addition to this the following routine maintenance work will be carried out in South Antrim constituency during October 2008:
- bridge joint replacement at M2 / Templepatrick Bridge;
- grass cutting, litter picking and sweeping on M2 and M22;
- Completion of minor carriageway surfacing at Ballyclare Service Road, Glengormley;
- emergency telephone and communication cabinet cleaning M2 and M22;
- safety barrier replacement on the M2 and M22;
- repair of traffic counter loops on M2 between junctions 6 and 7;
- temporary traffic management on M2 Junction 4 off-slip to facilitate works in association with the bus lane; and
- precautionary winter service treatments (as required).

Northern Ireland Water has advised that the location and works to be carried out in the South Antrim constituency during October 2008 are detailed in the table below:

Location	Works To Be Carried Out
Antrim	Laying of a trunkmain at Castle Road; Rehabilitation of Rashee Service Reservoir; Rehabilitation of Ballybracken Service Reservoir; Improvements to Hydepark Service Reservoir; Laying of a new sewer pipe at Milltown Road; Upgrading of Milltown Wastewater Treatment Works
Randalstown	Replacement of a watermain at Clonkeen
Kells	Replacement of a watermain at Old Ballybracken Road
Newtownabbey	Replacement of a watermain at Hightown Road

Traffic Lights

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development why the location of traffic lights on the Stewartstown Road, Belfast, has been changed in the last 3 months. (AQW 1580/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they are unaware of any recent changes to the locations of traffic lights on the Stewartstown Road.

If you can provide any further details, my officials will investigate the matter.

Translink

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of attacks on Translink staff in Belfast; and (ii) the areas in which they occurred. (AQW 1593/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Details of attacks on Translink staff in the last three years are detailed below:-

Date	Location	Bus/Train
18/01/2006	Europa Bus Centre	Bus
30/01/2006	Bel Steele Roundabout	Bus
09/02/2006	Poleglass	Bus
15/03/2006	Donegall Square West	Bus
20/06/2006	City centre	Bus
18/09/2006	Glen Road	Bus
24/10/2008	Falls depot	Bus
07/11/2006	City Hospital	Train
11/01/2007	Great Victoria Street	Train
28/02/2007	Queen Street	Bus
09/04/2007	Glengall Street	Bus
13/06/2007	City centre (Ballybeen service)	Bus
23/11/2007	Central Station	Train
11/02/2008	Antrim Road	Bus
29/03/2008	Central Station	Train
24/04/2008	Ligoniel terminus	Bus
26/05/2008	Antrim Road/Carlisle Circus	Bus
13/06/2008	Mountainhill Terminus	Bus
13/06/2008	Mountainhill Terminus (separate incident)	Bus
08/08/2008	Crumlin Road	Bus
25/09/2008	Crumlin Road	Bus
29/09/2008	Falls Road/Donegal Road	Bus
30/09/2008	Central Station	Train
03/10/2008	Queen Street	Bus
03/10/2008	Queen Street (separate incident)	Bus

Road Openings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many times roads were opened

in the Upper Bann constituency, in the past 3 years; (ii) to state the reason for each road opening; (iii) to list the bodies or individuals that requested the road to be opened; and (iv) to detail what checks were carried out on the quality of the reinstatement of the roads.
(AQW 1611/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it maintains this type of information on a council area basis. As you are aware, the Upper Bann constituency comprises part of Armagh, Craigavon and Banbridge District Council areas. It therefore makes it very difficult to produce accurate figures on a constituency basis. Although the details supplied have required some interpolation, Roads Service considers that it provides a reasonably accurate indication of the information requested.

Within the past 3 years, in the Upper Bann constituency, the number of road openings by utility providers or private individuals is estimated at 7250 and 950 respectively.

As approximately 8200 road openings were made within the 3 year period, it is not feasible to state the exact reason for each. However, with regard to utility providers, they have a statutory right to work on roads and footpaths, for the purpose of installing and maintaining their infrastructure. This would normally be the reason for their road openings. Although Roads Service has no control over the number of these works, there are procedures in place to regulate them, for the purposes of coordination and minimising disruption to road users.

Due to the number of openings it is not feasible to list all the bodies or individuals that have requested roads to be opened. However, the main utility providers responsible for the subject road openings are:

- Bord Gais Eireann
- British Telecom (NI)
- DRD Roads Service Street Lighting
- Firmus Energy
- Northern Ireland Electricity
- Northern Ireland Water
- Rivers Agency

In addition to these companies, private individuals, developers and contractors also carry out road openings under permit arrangements with Roads Service. Under these procedures, they are required to put a Road Bond in place prior to making the road opening. When the works have been completed Roads Service will inspect the reinstatement to ensure the work has been completed to the required specification. If the reinstatement is satisfactory the Bond will be released, otherwise they will be notified and instructed to

arrange the necessary remedial works prior to the release of the Bond.

Roads Service also undertakes 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 complied with during road reinstatement. Roads Service records the results of their 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.

During the 3 year period, in Upper Bann constituency, Roads Service carried out approximately 10,850 inspections on road openings.

Daily Traffic Flows

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail average daily traffic flows for (i) Stranmillis Road; and (ii) Stranmillis Embankment, in South Belfast.
(AQW 1614/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it collects data from approx 300 automatic traffic counting sites located throughout the North's road network. Unfortunately none of these automatic traffic counting sites are situated at the locations where you have requested information. Therefore it is not possible to provide the current average daily flows for the roads you have requested.

Ballycastle to Rathlin Island Ferry Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development if a passenger safety certificate was included in the tender process for the new Ballycastle to Rathlin Island Ferry service.
(AQW 1620/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As part of the tender process full details of any vessels proposed for use on the route, including passenger certificates, were required to be provided.

Causeway Explorer Ferry Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of days that were lost in service by the Causeway Explorer Ferry service to Rathlin Island, since the commencement of the new contract.
(AQW 1621/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The contract for the provision of the Rathlin Island to Ballycastle Ferry Service is held by Rathlin Island Ferry Limited. The Causeway Explorer is a vessel that the operator has used, on occasion, as a relief vessel on the route.

Since the commencement of the new contract, the operator has reported that only one return sailing by the Causeway Explorer has had to be cancelled when it was in use. This cancellation was due to bad weather.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of the Toughbook computers purchased by Northern Ireland Water.
(AQW 1640/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the provision of Toughbook computers was part of a wider contract for a managed service which included call handling, customer billing and a mobile work management solution.

The Toughbook was selected, at a cost of £2,244 each, in view of its all round capability to meet Northern Ireland Water's operational requirements.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development how much Northern Ireland Water, and its predecessor, the Northern Ireland Water Service, has spent on consultants in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 1641/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The expenditure incurred by Northern Ireland Water, and its predecessor, the Water Service, an Executive Agency within DRD, on consultants in each of the last 5 years is set out in the tables below. Included in the figures below are payments for a range of different types of consultancy services required by the organisation to conduct its business effectively, including management consultancy, technical consultancy and legal consultancy.

Northern Ireland Water	
Financial Year	Expenditure
2007-08	£8,599,432

The above information has been provided by Northern Ireland Water.

Water Service	
Financial Year	Expenditure
2006-07	£9,996,901
2005-06	£5,546,061
2004-05	£3,390,581
2003-04	£1,638,327

C84 Corkey Road and Coolkeeran Road Route Study

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the C84 Corkey Road and Coolkeeran Road Route Study.
(AQW 1643/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that all the works, on the C84 Corkey Road and Coolkeeran Road, relating to the improvement / replacement of warning signage and the associated lining, have now been completed.

Toughbook Computer Contract

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development which Northern Ireland companies were asked to bid for the Toughbook computer contract.
(AQW 1644/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the provision of Toughbook computers was part of a wider contract for a managed service which included call handling, customer billing and a mobile work management solution.

The contract was procured through a competitive tendering process and all companies had the opportunity to bid, including those from the North.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development which Northern Ireland Water executive is responsible for overseeing the terms and conditions negotiations with trade unions.
(AQW 1645/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its Director of Human Resources, Pauline Shepherd, has responsibility for overseeing the terms and conditions negotiations with trade unions. Northern Ireland Water is currently engaged with the Water Group of Trade Unions in negotiations on two specific terms

and conditions issues, a new Northern Ireland Water Severance Scheme and new Northern Ireland Water grading and pay arrangements.

Ferry Companies

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department has any powers to regulate the prices charged by ferry companies travelling to Scotland. (AQW 1646/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department for Regional Development has no such powers. The pricing structure and charges of ferry services to Scotland is a matter for the operators.

Compensation for Motorists

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what compensation his Department has made available to motorists who lost their vehicles during the recent flooding of the M1 Westlink underpass. (AQW 1669/09)

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 DBFO Package 1 Contract. The DBFO Contract indemnifies the Department for Regional Development against any claims arising from the works and therefore my Department has made no compensation available to motorists. Any claims relating the ongoing M1/Westlink Scheme that are received by my Department will be forwarded to the DBFO Company for their attention.

Public Transport Concessions

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development what public transport concessions are available to people registered as (i) partially sighted; and (ii) visually impaired. (AQW 1686/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: People registered as blind with a Health and Social Care Trust are eligible for free travel on public transport. People registered as partially sighted with a Trust are eligible for a half fare concession. People cannot be registered as “visually impaired”.

Construction of the A1

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if the traffic management plans his Department has authorised to deal with the construction of the A1, Cloughogue to Beechill section, have

acknowledged and accommodated the greater volume of traffic over the Christmas period; and if Vissim models of traffic flow prove that the adopted plans are suitable. (AQW 1735/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In regard to AQW 1735/09 my Department's Roads Service has advised that the Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) contractor for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue dual carriageway scheme is responsible for developing and implementing the Temporary Traffic Management measures. These measures, which are required to facilitate the construction of this strategic road improvement, are prepared in consultation with Roads Service's Traffic Management Section and the PSNI Road Policing branch, taking particular account of the traffic demands in the vicinity of the works. I can advise the Member that the DBFO contractor's liaison procedures also include the circulation of significant Temporary Traffic Management proposals to a range of interested parties, including for example Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade and the emergency services.

Whilst these arrangements seek to meet the requirements of the travelling public during this major road construction project, the exceptional traffic demands which have occurred in Newry over previous Christmas periods may have an adverse impact on the temporary traffic management proposals.

My Roads Service officials have advised that VISSIM, the software tool that is used to model traffic movements on a road network may be more commonly used in assessing and demonstrating the capacity of the layout of a junction, rather than the capacity of Temporary Traffic Management measures required to facilitate road works.

With regard to AQW 1741/09, it was with regret that I learned of the tragic death of a motorcyclist on the A1 Newry bypass on the evening of Friday 17 October.

The contractor's Temporary Traffic Management liaison procedures are circulated to a wide range of interested parties, including the emergency services. Further weekly emails are circulated by the DBFO contractor providing information on continuing and new Temporary Traffic Management arrangements. Furthermore, particular arrangements are in place to contact the emergency services at critical stages during each day, for example, when the ongoing blasting operations require a short term closure of the A1.

As regards AQW 1752/09, the Design Build Finance and Operate contractor has appointed a Liaison Officer for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue scheme. The Liaison Officer is an important point of contact between local residents and the scheme development engineers. Professional engineers are made available to the Liaison Officer to describe the scheme, explain the construction

processes and interpret the necessary technical data for local residents. Therefore, I do not consider that an additional qualified engineer is required.

Traffic Lights

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development for the reasons for the delay in switching on traffic lights at the junction of Primrose Hill and Saintfield Road in South Belfast. (AQW 1738/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the implementation of the traffic lights at the Primrose Hill/Saintfield Road junction is the responsibility of the developer (Taggart Homes Ltd) as required by their planning approval. The improvements to this junction started on the 26 March 2008 and were programmed to last for 12 weeks. However, there are a number of issues still to be addressed, by the developer, before the traffic signals can become operational.

As minimal work had been carried out on the site since 10 September 2008, Roads Service wrote to Taggart Homes Cairnshill Limited, on 1 October 2008, advising them to submit a written programme for the completion of all outstanding works within 21 days. No response has been received as yet, and failure to do so will result in Roads Service commencing formal enforcement proceedings under the appropriate legislation.

Construction of the A1

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the recent fatal accident on the Newry By-Pass, what contingency plans are in place to facilitate access for the emergency services during traffic disruption associated with the construction of the A1, Cloughogue to Beechill section, particularly at the southern end of the Cloughogue Roundabout.

(AQW 1741/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In regard to AQW 1735/09 my Department's Roads Service has advised that the Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) contractor for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue dual carriageway scheme is responsible for developing and implementing the Temporary Traffic Management measures. These measures, which are required to facilitate the construction of this strategic road improvement, are prepared in consultation with Roads Service's Traffic Management Section and the PSNI Road Policing branch, taking particular account of the traffic demands in the vicinity of the works. I can advise the Member that the DBFO contractor's liaison procedures also include the circulation of significant Temporary Traffic Management proposals to a range of

interested parties, including for example Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade and the emergency services.

Whilst these arrangements seek to meet the requirements of the travelling public during this major road construction project, the exceptional traffic demands which have occurred in Newry over previous Christmas periods may have an adverse impact on the temporary traffic management proposals.

My Roads Service officials have advised that VISSIM, the software tool that is used to model traffic movements on a road network may be more commonly used in assessing and demonstrating the capacity of the layout of a junction, rather than the capacity of Temporary Traffic Management measures required to facilitate road works.

With regard to AQW 1741/09, it was with regret that I learned of the tragic death of a motorcyclist on the A1 Newry bypass on the evening of Friday 17 October.

The contractor's Temporary Traffic Management liaison procedures are circulated to a wide range of interested parties, including the emergency services. Further weekly emails are circulated by the DBFO contractor providing information on continuing and new Temporary Traffic Management arrangements. Furthermore, particular arrangements are in place to contact the emergency services at critical stages during each day, for example, when the ongoing blasting operations require a short term closure of the A1.

As regards AQW 1752/09, the Design Build Finance and Operate contractor has appointed a Liaison Officer for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue scheme. The Liaison Officer is an important point of contact between local residents and the scheme development engineers. Professional engineers are made available to the Liaison Officer to describe the scheme, explain the construction processes and interpret the necessary technical data for local residents. Therefore, I do not consider that an additional qualified engineer is required.

Blasting Operations

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQO 646/09, (i) how many properties were surveyed prior to blasting operations associated with the construction of the A1, Cloughogue to Beechill section; (ii) if these properties will be re-surveyed after rock blasting ceases; and (iii) if owners of damaged properties will be compensated quickly. (AQW 1745/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service has advised that 268 surveys were carried out by the Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) contractor prior to the commencement of blasting. I understand that the contractor plans to resurvey

these properties after rock blasting has ceased. As I indicated in my reply to AQO 646/09, should damage be caused by the rock blasting operation it will be a matter for the contractor, under the terms of the contract, to deal with any claims which may arise. In this respect, my Department's Roads Service will seek the contractor's assurance that such claims are dealt with expeditiously.

Blasting Operations

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQO 646/09, to define 'current good practice'; and to explain what 'necessary and appropriate measures implemented to protect properties' have been taken. (AQW 1751/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Under the terms of the contract, the Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) Company is required to adhere to all the rules, guidelines and safety procedures contained in BS5607:1998 'Code of practice for safe use of explosives in the construction industry'. This Standard sets target impact levels to avoid damage to nearby property. In addition to this, the DBFO Company is also required to comply with the requirements of relevant authorities, which, in this instance, includes the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council. The Council's requirements, which were reflected in the Environmental Statement for the scheme, are even more stringent than the industry standard.

Construction of the A1

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to appointing a qualified engineer, capable of interpreting the necessary technical data for local residents, to act as a liaison officer between residents and the contractor for the construction of the new A1. (AQW 1752/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In regard to AQW 1735/09 my Department's Roads Service has advised that the Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) contractor for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme is responsible for developing and implementing the Temporary Traffic Management measures. These measures, which are required to facilitate the construction of this strategic road improvement, are prepared in consultation with Roads Service's Traffic Management Section and the PSNI Road Policing branch, taking particular account of the traffic demands in the vicinity of the works. I can advise the Member that the DBFO contractor's liaison procedures also include the circulation of significant Temporary Traffic Management proposals to a range of

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development when Housing Executive properties in the Glen Estate, Newtownards, will receive new windows. (AQW 1123/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): A multi element improvement scheme is planned to commence in August 2009 for 16 bungalows within the Glen Estate, Newtownards, to include replacement of window units where required.

Additionally, an external cyclical maintenance scheme is planned to commence in April 2011 for 326 dwellings within the Glen Estate, to include the replacement of defective window units where appropriate.

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development 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. (AQW 1152/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department does not measure carbon emissions for journeys.

There are no current plans to purchase carbon offsets for long distance journeys.

Disability Adaptation Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in the North Down constituency have applied for disability adaptation grants; and of those, how many have been inspected and scheduled for work, in the last year. (AQW 1258/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not readily available for the North Down Parliamentary constituency. The Housing Executive holds information based on the current local government District Council model which, for North Down, takes in parts of the District Council areas of North Down and Newtownards.

During the 12 months from 1 October 2007 to 30 September 2008, there were 297 applications for disabled adaptation grants in these areas. All 297 properties have been inspected following receipt of an Occupational Therapist recommendation and 281 schedules of work have been issued.

Complex Needs Status

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) housing applicants in the North Down constituency have been assessed as having complex needs; and (ii) newbuilds in the constituency are designed to accommodate people with complex needs. (AQW 1261/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In the financial year 2007/08, a total of 55 housing applicants in the North Down constituency were assessed as having complex needs.

Since 1 April 2007, 24 units of accommodation for people with complex needs were completed in the North Down constituency. A further 13 similar units of accommodation are included in the current Social Housing Development Programme.

Complex Needs Status

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development what measures she will put in place to accommodate housing applicants from South Down who have been awarded complex needs status. (AQW 1300/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are two main housing options for complex needs applicants:

- General needs accommodation with an agreed, tailored care package for the relevant applicant, or household member;
- Supported housing where support and care are provided directly within the housing scheme.

Complex needs applicants who require supported housing are considered without reference to points and separate from the general needs waiting list. Applicants will be housed in accordance with their individual needs subject to suitable supported accommodation being available.

Home Start

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development what funding is available from her Department to assist Home Start in providing support to parents with young children. (AQW 1352/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are no funding programmes currently open to which Home Start might apply.

Housing Executive Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the uptake of Housing Executive grants in (i) the Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) the Strangford constituency, over the last 12 months; and if there has been a decrease in the number of grants available. (AQW 1371/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by Parliamentary constituency area. The Housing Executive's Home Improvement Grants Scheme operates in line with local council areas. Strangford constituency includes the council areas of Ards, Castlereagh and Down.

For the period 1 October 2007 to 30 September 2008 the uptake of Housing Executive grants was as follows:-

Ards Borough Council area –

- 319 preliminary enquiry forms requesting grant aid received
- 261 schedules of work were issued

Castlereagh District Council area –

- 278 preliminary enquiry forms requesting grant aid received
- 224 schedules of work were issued

Down District Council area –

- 429 preliminary enquiry forms requesting grant aid received
- 333 schedules of work were issued

The number of grants available has not reduced over the last 12 months.

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development how many staff are employed in her Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1378/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Nine staff are employed in my Departmental Private Office at an annual cost of £260,247 up to 30 September 2008.

Departmental Website

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the annual cost to maintain her Departmental website. (AQW 1386/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is not possible to report the precise annual maintenance cost as it involves a large number of staff for a small but variable proportion of their time.

However it costs the department £43.47 every two years to renew the domain name for the departmental website and approximately £1,000 a year is paid to Texthelp Systems to allow the DSD site to be read aloud by visitors who can use the cost-free Browsealoud software provided.

Home Improvement Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what Housing Executive home improvement schemes are planned for the Churchill area of Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1424/09)

The Minister for Social Development: An external cyclical maintenance scheme is programmed for all 31 properties owned by the Housing Executive within the Churchill area of Bangor (and one sold dwelling) for January 2011.

Departmental Land at Ballee

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the sale of departmental land at Ballee, Ballymena.

(AQW 1477/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In May 2007, my Department agreed to sell 90 acres of land at Ballee Road East, Ballymena to a consortium of former owners. For a variety of reasons this sale has not yet taken place.

Evacuated Residents

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development why no assistance was offered to evacuated residents in terms of (i) finance; (ii) food; (iii) transport; (iv) counselling and; (v) clothing, in the immediate aftermath of the fire at Loughside Drive, Ballynahinch. (AQW 1485/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Considerable assistance was provided to residents evacuated following the fire at Loughside Drive. In the immediate aftermath of the recent fire at this block of flats, an 'incident room' was set up at the Community Centre in Ballynahinch, where staff from the Housing Executive, Social Security Agency, voluntary and charitable organisations all worked together with the families to offer help and support regarding their housing, financial and other needs.

The Housing Executive staff carried out homeless interviews and arranged emergency temporary accommodation for 5 of the 12 affected households. The Social Security Agency made 12 awards from the social fund totalling £3621.96 in the immediate aftermath of the fire to meet immediate needs. These awards represented a payment to the individual / family unit in each of the 12 Housing Executive properties affected by the fire.

The Housing Executive continues to liaise closely with the residents and their local representatives to advise them of the progress of repairs and the availability of suitable alternative accommodation. They will also advise all residents of their individual level of redecoration grant entitlement upon completion of the remedial works.

Financial Assistance

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development if she plans to create a fund to provide immediate assistance to people who are left homeless, as a result of fire. (AQW 1486/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are measures in place to grant discretionary crisis loans from the Social Fund in such circumstances.

New Social Housing Units

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number and location of any new social housing units built in the North Down constituency, since 2005. (AQW 1509/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The tables below detail the number and location of social housing units which started on site in the North Down constituency since 2005 to date.

2004/05

Scheme Name	Units
Abbey Place, Holywood	29
	29

2005/06

Scheme Name	Units
4 Abbey Mews, Millisle	1
33 Dufferin Avenue, Bangor	8
81 Brunswick Road, Bangor	1
	10

2006/07

Scheme Name	Units
1-3 Seaview, Millisle	4
119 - 121 & 195 Donaghadee Road, Bangor	31
35-37 Shore Road, Holywood	30
Bloomfield Road South, Bangor	14
Twisel Lodge, Holywood	7
Princetown Road, Bangor	17
	103

2007/08

Scheme Name	Units
3 South Avenue, Bangor	1

Scheme Name	Units
28-32 Belfast Road, Bangor & 18 Inglewood Park, Bangor	37
2A Springwell Drive (1 Donaghadee Road), Groomsport	24
32 Jackson Road, Holywood	1
Mayne House, Bloomfield Road, Bangor (Croft)	9
14 Bloomfield Court, Bangor	1
15 Ballyminetragh Gardens, Bangor	1
33 Ballyminetragh Gardens, Bangor	1
6 Park Crescent, Millisle	1
24A Main Street, Millisle	1
5 Dufferin Avenue, Bangor	2
	79

2008/09 TO DATE

Scheme Name	Units
38 – 40 Bryansburn Road, Bangor	11

Vandalism and Graffiti

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what action her Department is taking to address the problems of (i) vandalism; and (ii) graffiti, on the estates in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1512/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive continues to address all forms of vandalism and graffiti through its response maintenance and planned improvement programmes. The Housing Executive's District Offices within the North Down constituency area spent a total of £14,458 during the last financial year on vandalism repairs and graffiti removal.

The Housing Executive deploys Neighbourhood Wardens within its local offices who seek to identify instances of graffiti and vandalism at the earliest opportunity. District Office staff also refer issues to the Housing Executive's Community Safety Officers for further action if required.

You Owe Your Child Campaign

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are in place to analyse the success of the 'You Owe Your Child' campaign. (AQW 1519/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The impact of the campaign will be measured over the short, medium and long term against a series of objectives that were set at the beginning of the campaign. It will

take time for people's attitudes and behaviours towards child maintenance to be influenced and change.

The objectives for the campaign are:

- To make it clear that non-payment of child maintenance adversely affects the child.
- To increase awareness of the child maintenance enforcement measures that exist.
- To increase confidence/belief that CMED is taking/ will take action against non-compliant parents and non-resident parent debtors.
- To increase awareness of who is responsible for child maintenance enforcement in Northern Ireland.
- To encourage partially compliant, non-compliant and non-resident parents to take action as a result of the campaign.

Each objective will be measured using relevant mechanisms such as independent research, analysis of volumes and nature of calls to the CMED helpline number and visits to the CMED website youoweyourchild.info. Progress towards targets will be reviewed at appropriate points during the campaign lifetime.

The advertising element of the campaign has been planned to contribute towards achievement of CMED's broader child maintenance targets to get money to more children.

However, advertising is only one element of the campaign and there are other activities that support the advertising including a mailshot and telephone calls to non-compliant and partially non-compliant non resident parents.

Rathgill Community Association

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development why (i) Small Pockets of Deprivation; and (ii) Local Community funding, for Rathgill Community Association in Bangor, has not been paid. (AQW 1527/09)

The Minister for Social Development: These two programmes in Rathgill are administered by NIHE on behalf of my Department with North Down LSP acting as an Intermediary Funding Body. An advance payment for £20,000 was made in April in respect of salary costs for 2008/09 but the application which NIHE has received for 2008/09 cannot be processed until matters relating to payments in 2007/08 have been resolved.

North Down LSP submitted the outstanding vouching information to NIHE on 29 September. Work on processing this is currently ongoing and should be cleared by the end of October. This will enable the application received by NIHE in respect

of 2008/09 to be considered and assessed for further payments to be made.

Social Housing

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development how many people were allocated social housing between (i) October 2007 and March 2008; and (ii) April 2008 and September 2008, in the East Belfast constituency. (AQW 1535/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by Parliamentary constituency area. The Housing Executive report on the statistics requested by District Office area. The table below details all social housing allocations for the periods in question for the East Belfast District Office and Castlereagh District Offices.

	01 October 2007 to 31 March 2008	01 April 2008 to 30 September 2008
East Belfast	190	199
Castlereagh	152	152

Housing Executive Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive schemes in the Ards Borough have been deferred in 2008-9; and how many of these were deferred from previous years. (AQW 1561/09)

The Minister for Social Development: No schemes within the Ards Borough were deferred or delayed for 2008/09. Also, none of the schemes within the Ards Borough area which are programmed for 2008/09 were deferred from previous years.

Housing Executive Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive schemes were carried out in the Ards Borough for the year 2008-9. (AQW 1562/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In the Ards Borough there have been five improvement schemes started on site between 1 April – 30 September 2008.

Cutting Grass

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development has the Housing Executive a policy to ensure there is a clean up after cutting grass,

in accordance with health and safety standards.
(AQW 1563/09)

The Minister for Social Development:

Contractors cutting grass on behalf of the Housing Executive do not lift grass cuttings but are required to sweep cuttings from paved areas. Where the Housing Executive receives reports of grass cuttings on paved area, it will arrange for them to be removed.

Social Fund Community Care Grant

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each council area, (i) the COMMUNITY CARE GRANTS

number of Social Fund Community Care Grant applications made; (ii) the number of these applications granted and denied; and (iii) the total amount paid, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1576/09)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not available in the format requested.

The table below details the number of Social Fund Community Care Grant applications made within each operational District area within the Social Security Agency; and the number of these applications granted and denied. These figures have been extracted from Social Security Agency internal monitoring systems.

2005-2006	Belfast North	Belfast West	East Down	North	South	West	Total
Applications received	9,673	10,765	7,039	7,305	8,295	10,968	54,045
Total Refusals	4,108	4,882	2,932	3,178	4,247	4,480	23,827
Total awards	5,388	5,834	3,934	4,034	4,110	6,116	29,216

2006-2007	Belfast North	Belfast West	East Down	North	South	West	Total
Applications received	9,517	9,972	6,665	6,681	7,920	10,230	50,985
Total Refusals	4,286	4,723	2,967	2,905	3,785	4,140	22,806
Total awards	5,332	5,627	3,695	3,776	4,065	6,030	28,525

2007-2008	Belfast North	Belfast West	East Down	North	South	West	Total
Applications received	8,382	8,512	5,751	5,944	7,252	9,157	44,998
Total Refusals	3,573	3,361	2,873	2,370	3,429	3,812	19,418
Total awards	4,888	5,045	3,075	3,583	3,797	5,511	25,899

Note: Any difference between total applications received and the number of awards and initial refusals is due to applications being withdrawn and/or not decided at the time the count was made.

The table below details Community Care Grant expenditure for the last 3 years these figures are expressed in millions and have been taken from the Social Security Agency Accounts.

District	05/06 £m	06/07 £m	07/08 £m
North	1.88	1.75	1.84
South	2.13	2.20	2.12
West	2.61	2.72	2.67
BN&EA*	2.60	2.61	2.61
BW&L**	2.52	2.52	2.59
East Down	1.76	1.79	1.78
Total	13.51	13.59	13.61

* BNEA Belfast North & East Antrim

** BW&L Belfast West & Lisburn

Social Fund Crisis Loan Applications

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each council area, (i) the number of Social Fund Crisis Loan applications made; (ii) the number of these applications granted and denied; and (iii) the total amount paid, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1577/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested.

The table below details the number of Social Fund Crisis Loan applications made within each operational District area within the Social Security Agency and the number of these applications granted and denied. Figures are extracted from Social Security Agency internal monitoring systems.

CRISIS LOAN APPLICATIONS

2005-2006	Belfast North	Belfast West	East Down	North	South	West	Total
Applications received	18,158	13,655	22,670	12,066	19,344	18,763	104,656
Total Refusals	3,913	3,573	2,118	3,067	5,566	1,085	19,322
Total awards	14,008	9,807	20,125	8,847	13,400	17,501	83,688

2006-2007	Belfast North	Belfast West	East Down	North	South	West	Total
Applications received	19,569	15,220	24,947	11,976	18,564	17,258	107,534
Total Refusals	3,204	4,766	3,806	2,854	5,520	707	20,857
Total awards	16,036	10,222	20,742	9,012	12,595	16,401	85,008

2007-2008	Belfast North	Belfast West	East Down	North	South	West	Total
Applications received	22,266	13,322	21,188	11,077	17,545	15,489	100,887
Total Refusals	3,656	4,437	4,057	2,452	5,389	870	20,861
Total awards	18,441	8,715	16,765	8,456	11,843	14,401	78,621

Note: Any difference between total applications received and the number of awards and initial refusals is due to applications being withdrawn and/or not decided at the time the count was made.

The table below details Crisis Loan expenditure for the past 3 years. This information has been taken from Social Security Agency Accounts. Figures are expressed in millions.

District	05/06 £m	06/07 £m	07/08 £m
North	1.02	1.18	1.13
South	1.03	0.99	0.97
West	1.74	1.61	1.48
BN&EA*	1.40	1.97	2.31
BW&L**	1.04	0.93	0.86
East Down	1.86	2.26	1.79
Total	8.09	8.95	8.54

* BNEA Belfast North & East Antrim

** BW&L Belfast West & Lisburn

Travelling Community

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the statutory equality obligations; and (ii) the impact these obligations have on decisions, on the creation of traveller's sites. (AQW 1601/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The statutory equality obligations that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive applies in relation to Traveller's sites are in accordance with its obligations under section 75 of the

Northern Ireland Act (1998) as defined in the guidance issued by the Equality Commission.

The impact of these obligations on decisions relating to the development of Travellers sites ensures that the diverse accommodation needs of Traveller families are recognised in terms of their position under section 75 as a specific ethnic group and also in terms of the associated impact of other equality issues including children and young people and disability.

Travelling Community

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the options available to the Housing Executive when a member of the travelling community requests that (i) provision for a site be created in a particular area; or (ii) existing provision be extended in a particular area. (AQW 1602/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The creation of new Traveller sites and the extension of existing sites in a particular area is planned and implemented by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in accordance with the scale of need within the geographical areas of choice of the Traveller families. The Traveller Accommodation Programme is underpinned and informed by the Comprehensive Needs Assessment of Travellers.

Travelling Community

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development what restrictions are in place to limit the scope of the Housing Executive to spread the provision of traveller sites equally across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1603/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are no restrictions in place to limit the scope of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to spread the provision of Traveller sites equally across Northern Ireland. The provision of Traveller sites is informed by the Comprehensive Needs Assessment of Traveller families which identifies the geographical areas of choice of Travellers and this clearly shows that the need for Traveller accommodation is not spread equally across Northern Ireland.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what estimates her Department has of the (i) Irish national; and (ii) non-UK, population in Northern Ireland, on the basis of registrations for new National Insurance numbers. (AQW 1628/09)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not available.

Housing Executive Properties

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1337/09, how many people are currently renting Housing Executive properties. (AQW 1662/09)

The Minister for Social Development: At 30th September 2008 the total number of occupied Housing Executive properties was 87,527.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if the contract for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry was advertised in the European Journal for expressions of interest; and if so, on what date it was advertised. (AQW 1671/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Dove Gardens scheme was advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union on 23 October 2007. Ref 2007/S204-247781.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if the contract conditions for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry included socially beneficial conditions at the time of invitation and responding to expressions of interest; and if not, to detail the reasons. (AQW 1672/09)

The Minister for Social Development: No. The form of contract for Dove Gardens was a Joint Contracts Tribunal (JCT) Standard Form of Building Contract with Quantities 2005. There are no socially beneficial conditions in this standard form of contract. The advantage of using a standard form of contract is that it places the emphasis on best price.

Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if she intends to examine if Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee would qualify for funding under SPOD. (AQW 1769/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Small Pocket of Deprivation programme is directed, as the name suggests, at small areas of urban deprivation but located outside the 36 primary Neighbourhood renewal areas. Beechfield does not meet the criteria for the

SPOD programme. This is the third and final year of the programme and an evaluation of the programme is about to be carried out. Any decision to extend the duration of the programme or its coverage will be subject to the outcome of the evaluation and priorities in my Department's budget plans in the future.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Carbon Usage

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission if records are kept of carbon usage; and what plans it has to purchase carbon offsets each time a long distance journey is undertaken. (AQW 1191/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): The Assembly Commission is very aware of the need to become more energy efficient and Properties Directorate currently takes part in the Public Sector Energy Campaign (PSEC).

An audit in 2000 determined that the Northern Ireland Assembly emitted 1,957,054 kg of CO₂. This figure remained fairly constant through to 2005. By 2006 the CO₂ emissions had reduced to 1,165,561 kg, a reduction of 40.4% from 2000. This large saving is mainly due to the fact that Parliament Buildings converted from using oil burners in 2005 to gas.

In the ongoing Public Sector Energy Campaign, each public-sector site in NI is asked to reduce their CO₂ emissions by 20% by 2010 and 60% by 2050.

All of this information is in the public domain on the DFP website at www.dfpni.gov.uk/index/public-sector-energy-campaign/psec-publications.htm

In respect of long distance journeys, Personnel keeps records of all journeys which have been arranged through the Personnel Travel Desk but carbon usage in respect of these journeys is not currently recorded.

There are no plans to record the carbon usage or to purchase carbon offsets in respect of these journeys.

The Assembly Commission does however plan to appoint a Head of Environmental Services to Properties Directorate. This post holder will have responsibility for developing and improving all areas of sustainability within the Assembly.

Parliament Buildings Tours

Miss McIlveen asked the Assembly Commission to detail the numbers of visitors to, and tours carried out in, Parliament Buildings from 1 March 2008 to 30 September 2008, compared to the same period in 2007, broken down per month. (AQW 1402/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter):

	2007		2008	
	Visitors	Tours Held	Visitors	Tours Held
March	2109	72	4812	107
April	2604	79	8800	191
May	5837	134	8485	175
June	8035	195	8607	192
July	2417	95	1933	82
August	2311	97	1740	66
Sept	4755	118	6379	136
Totals	28,068	790	40,756	949

These figures include visitor numbers and tours handled by the Education Service, Events Office and the External Liaison Unit.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 07 November 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Community Relations Council

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the work carried out by the Community Relations Council to attract applications for (i) core funding; and (ii) project funding, from the evangelical protestant community, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1596/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The Community Relations Council (CRC) is open to applications from all sections of the community. Below is a summary of the overall approach of the organisation to attracting applications.

All CRC Grant Schemes are publicly advertised through the organisation's website and various community networks i.e. NICVA, through District Council Community Relations Officers and Good Relations Officers and, in the case of the CRC's EU Programme, advertising is also carried out in the press and through the SEUPB website.

All community and voluntary based groups have open access to the Schemes. In addition, various Information Events on funding opportunities are held throughout the region by all the funding schemes. All grant applications received are processed in accordance with agreed Council practices/operating principles and receive fair and equal treatment. Review/complaints procedures are also in place.

Community Relations Council

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the applications for (i) core; and (ii) project, funding from organisations

in the evangelical protestant community, apart from ECONI/Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, received by the Community Relations Council, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1597/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The following organisations have made applications to the Community Relations Council over the last five years. In the absence of a definition of 'protestant evangelical community' a full list of groups involved in/with protestant church-based projects has been provided. The information is provided by year and by grant.

(I) 2008/09 CORE FUNDING

Group	Amount Requested	Decision
174	£44,216	Approved – initially for 1 year
LINC Resource Centre	£86,653	Approved – initially for 1 year
Forthspring	£25,558	Declined

2008/09 PATHFINDER FUNDING – CORE COSTS

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
LINC Resource Centre	White City Community Development Association	£36,775
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£35,000

(II) 2008/09 –PROJECT FUNDING

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
174 Trust	Youth Project	£2,575	£2,500
174 Trust	Facilitation for Evaluation	£2,467.50	£2,467.50
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Strengthening Civic Society 2008	£990	£990
BT14 Churches Forum	Facilitation of Establishment of Forum	£2,500	£1,930
Lowe Memorial Presbyterian project	Community Fun Day	£600	£600
Lowe Memorial Presbyterian Group	Streetreach at 174 Trust	£250	£250
Markethill Presbyterian Church	Networking Across The Divide	£6,000	£0

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Ormeau Churches Together	GLU	£500	£500
PCI	Peacemaking Project 2006-09	£22,500	£7,500
Quaker House	Quilting Towards A Shared Future	£4,512.50	£2,000
Restoration Ministries	Forward Together In Diversity	£3,775	£3,775
Summer Madness	Summer Madness	£3,000	£3,000
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Youth Project	£1,734	£1,734
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Training Project	£1,900	£1,750
Church of Ireland Hard Gospel Project	WWJB Project	£5,000	£0
The Corrymeela Community	Connecting Cultures	£3,505	£3,505
Y Zone	Community Outreach Programme 08	£6,180	£3,000
YMCA Lurgan	Lurgan SOS	£2,490	£2,490
Linc Resource Centre	Women In Conflict	£7,365	£3,000
Youth With A Mission	Faith & Conflict Conference	£6,000	£5,000

(I) 2007/08 CORE FUNDING

Group	Amount requested	Decision
Corrymeela	£129,050	Approved – 2 year contract

2007/08 PATHFINDER FUNDING – CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/ programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£20,000
LINC Resource Centre	Bonfire management project.	13,500

(II) 2007/08 PROJECT COSTS

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles Inter-Church Group	Annual Educational Visit	£550	£550
East Belfast Mission	A Theological Conversation	£3,600	£2,000
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles Inter-Church Group	Young Families Group	£1,000	£1,000
Lowe Memorial Presbyterian Church	Community Fun Day	£2,232	£500
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Peacemaking Project 2006-09	£22,500	£7,500
Quaker House	Quilt Project Phase 2	£7,950	£4,000
Restoration Ministries	Hospitality Evenings	£3,870	£2,070
Linc Resource Centre	Mentoring Programme	£7,205	£5,000
Restoration Ministries	Monthly Networking Meetings	£1,160	£1,160
Restoration Ministries	Faith & Friendship	£1,030	£550
Restoration Ministries	Monthly Networking Meetings	£1,160	£640
Restoration Ministries	Conference-Megan McKenna	£800	£600
Summer Madness	Street Reach	£11,000	£7,000
Corrymeela	Connecting Cultures	£2,500	£2,500
The Y Zone	Community Outreach Programme 07	£4,092	£1,692

(I) 2006/07 CORE FUNDING

Group	Amount requested	Decision
Forthspring	£30,849	Approved – 2 year contract
174 Trust	£41,656	Approved – 2 year contract
LINC	£31,458	Approved – 2 year contract

(II) 2006/07 PROJECT FUNDING

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Adullam Christian Ministries	25th Anniversary Integrated Education Exhibition	£8,000	£4,000
Ballymena Inter-Church Alpha Organising Committee	BICA Course	£3,000	£0
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Strengthening Civic Society 2006	£742.50	£742.50
Belmont Council of Churches	Significant Places in the life of St Patrick	£550	£550
Church of God Shankill	What's it all about?	£2,000	£2,000
City of Belfast YMCA	Staff Training	£1,920	£0
Linc Resource Centre	Rathcoole CR Work	£2,000	£2,000
Summer Madness	Street Reach	£9,500	£5,000
Summer Madness	International Reconciliation Conference	£7,500	£5,000
Y Zone	Community Outreach Programme 2006	£4,610	£3,500

(I) 2005/06 CORE FUNDING

Group	Amount Requested	Decision
174 Trust	£38,802	Declined
LINC Resource Centre	£44,800	Approved – 1 year contract
The Link (N'ards)	£40,095	Declined

2005/06 PATHFINDER FUNDING – CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
174 Trust	To promote the building of bridges and good relations between all the communities in North Belfast, by encouraging mutual understanding through honest dialogue and meaningful engagement.	£33,382

(II) 2005/06 PROJECT FUNDING

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Training For Trainers on Non-Violence	£4,000	£4,000
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Summer Diversionary Programme	£5,000	£4,000
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Summer Diversionary Programme	£1,500	£1,500
174 Trust	Staff & Management Training	£3,565	£3,565
Ballymacarett Inter-Church Group	Group Outing to Downpatrick Area	£179	£179
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Strengthening Civic Society Project	£742.50	£742.50
Church of Ireland	Shared Future	£1,800	£1,390
Conference of Religious Ireland	Joppa Project	£10,000	£5,000
Cookstown & District Inter-Church Forum	Community Event	£17,000	£0
Down & Dromore Reconciliation Committee	Rwanda Visit – bursary costs	£10,000	£5,000
Dungannon & District Clergy Forum	Strategic Plan	£2,950	£2,950
East Belfast Mission	Breaking the cycle	£2,340	£1,560
Fermanagh Churches Forum	Programme 05-06	£1,375	£800
Gilford & Tullyish Churches Together	Community BBQ	£3,300	£1,400
Gilford & Tullyish Churches Together	Exploration of diversity of background	£4,300	£2,100
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Christmas Weekend	£1,500	£1,100

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Inter-Church Group	£500	£500
Link Family & Community Centre	Community Relations Project	£5,985	£3,500
Immanuel Church of Ireland	Creating Community	£1,230	£1,230
New Mossley Presbyterian Youth Club	Cross Community Weekend in Corrymeela	£1,500	£1,500
Restoration Ministries	Difficult Conversations	£600	£460
Restoration Ministries	Monthly Networking Meetings	£1,160	£1,160
Sligo Presbyterian Church	Gala Celebrations of Christmas Peace	£52510	£0
Summer Madness	International Reconciliation Conference	£9,250	£5,000
Church of Ireland	Hard Gospel Project	£5,000	£2,292
Youth with a Mission	Forgiveness Curriculum Project	£6,000	£0
Linc Resource Centre	Linc/An Eochiar Initiative	£2,900	£2,540
Linc Resource Centre	Creative Expressions	£1,416	£1,396
Linc Resource Centre	Mobile Phone Network (P)	£2,000	£1,492

(I) 2004/05 CORE FUNDING

Group	Amount Requested	Decision
174 Trust	£37,829	Declined

2004/05 PROJECT FUNDING

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Community Relations and Churches	Churches Building the Peace	£4,000	Withdrawn
Community Relations & Churches	Churches Building the Peace	£4,000	Withdrawn

Group	Project	Amount Requested	Amount Awarded
Corrymeela	YNI	£3,900	Withdrawn
Diocese of Derry and Raphoe	Peacebuilding Strategy Conference	£9,100	£5,000
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Christmas Family Weekend	£1,000	£1,000
East Belfast Mission	Past to Future	£4,900	£3,450
Parish of Glenavy	150 years Celebration of Church Building	£300	£200
P.C.I	Peacemaking Project 2005-08	£22,500	£7,500
P.C.I	Day Conference	£2,000	£1,836
Restoration Ministries	Difficult Conversation	£731	£731
Linc Resource Centre	Mount Vernon Young Men Awareness	£1,000	£664
Linc Resource Centre	Community Relations Improvement	£2,630	£1,835
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Discussion Group	£700	£550

Community Relations Council

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the organisations from the protestant evangelical community, apart from ECONI/Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, that have been awarded (i) core; and (ii) project, funding by the Community Relations Council, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 1598/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The following organisations have made applications to the Community Relations Council over the last ten years. In the absence of a definition of 'protestant evangelical community' a full list of groups involved in/protestant church-based projects has been provided. The information is provided by year and by grant.

(I) 2008/09 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£132,088

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
174 Trust	To promote the building of bridges and good relations between all the communities in North Belfast, by encouraging mutual understanding through honest dialogue and meaningful engagement.	£44,000
LINC Resource Centre	To develop and implement a co-ordinated approach to community relations work in Protestant communities across North Belfast and to develop co-operative linkages with organisations in the Catholic community in order to develop both intra and inter community relations.	£78,769

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
The Corrymeela Community	Connecting Cultures	£3,505
Y Zone	Community Outreach Programme 08	£3,000
Linc Resource Centre	Women In Conflict	£3,000
YMCA Lurgan	Lurgan SOS	£2,490
Youth With A Mission	Faith & Conflict Conference	£5,000

(I) 2007/08 CORE**PATHFINDER FUNDING – CORE COSTS**

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
LINC Resource Centre	White City Community Development Association	£36,775
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£35,000

2008/09 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
174 Trust	Youth Project	£2,500
174 Trust	Facilitation for Evaluation	£2,467.50
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Strengthening Civic Society 2008	£990
BT14 Churches Forum	Facilitation of Establishment of Forum	£1,930
Lowe Memorial Presbyterian project	Community Fun Day	£600
Lowe Memorial Presbyterian Group	Streetreach at 174 Trust	£250
Ormeau Churches Together	GLU	£500
PCI	Peacemaking Project 2006-09	£7,500
Quaker House	Quilting Towards A Shared Future	£2,000
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Youth Project	£1,734
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Training Project	£1,750
Restoration Ministries	Forward Together In Diversity	£3,775
Summer Madness	Summer Madness	£3,000

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£128,866
174 Trust	To promote the building of bridges and good relations between all the communities in North Belfast, by encouraging mutual understanding through honest dialogue and meaningful engagement.	£33,959
LINC Resource Centre	To develop and implement a co-ordinated approach to community relations work in Protestant communities across North Belfast and to develop co-operative linkages with organisations in the Catholic community in order to develop both intra and inter community relations.	£29,977
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£21,134

PATHFINDER FUNDING – CORE COSTS

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£20,000
LINC Resource Centre	Bonfire management project.	13,500

2007/08 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
East Belfast Mission	A Theological Conversation	£2,000
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles Inter-Church Group	Annual Educational Visit	£550

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles Inter-Church Group	Young Families Group	£1,000
Lowe Memorial Presbyterian Church	Community Fun Day	£500
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Peacemaking Project 2006-09	£7,500
Quaker House	Quilt Project Phase 2	£4,000
Restoration Ministries	Hospitality Evenings	£2,070
Restoration Ministries	Monthly Networking Meetings	£1,160
Restoration Ministries	Faith & Friendship	£550
Restoration Ministries	Monthly Networking Meetings	£640
Restoration Ministries	Conference- Megan McKenna	£600
Summer Madness	Street Reach	£7,000
Corrymeela	Connecting Cultures	£2,500
Linc Resource Centre	Mentoring Programme	£5,000
The Y Zone	Community Outreach Programme 07	£1,692

(I) 2006/07 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£125,000
174 Trust	To promote the building of bridges and good relations between all the communities in North Belfast, by encouraging mutual understanding through honest dialogue and meaningful engagement.	£32,940
LINC Resource Centre	To develop and implement a co-ordinated approach to community relations work in Protestant communities across North Belfast and to develop co-operative linkages with organisations in the Catholic community in order to develop both intra and inter community relations.	£30,000
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/ programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£20,500

(II) 2006/07 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Adullam Christian Ministries	25th Anniversary Integrated Education Exhibition	£4,000
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Strengthening Civic Society 2006	£742.50
Belmont Council of Churches	Significant Places in the life of St Patrick	£550
Church of God Shankill	What's it all about?	£2,000
Linc Resource Centre	Rathcoole CR Work	£2,000
Summer Madness	Street Reach	£5,000
Summer Madness	International Reconciliation Conference	£5,000
Y Zone	Community Outreach Programme 2006	£3,500

(I) 2005/06 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	150,000
LINC Resource Centre	To develop and implement a co-ordinated approach to community relations work in Protestant communities across North Belfast and to develop co-operative linkages with organisations in the Catholic community in order to develop both intra and inter community relations.	30,000
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	20,500

PATHFINDER FUNDING – CORE COSTS

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
174 Trust	To promote the building of bridges and good relations between all the communities in North Belfast, by encouraging mutual understanding through honest dialogue and meaningful engagement.	£33,382

(II) 2005/06 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Ballymacarett Inter-Church Group	Group Outing to Downpatrick Area	£179

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Training For Trainers on Non-Violence	£4,000
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Summer Diversionary Programme	£4,000
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Summer Diversionary Programme (P)	£1,500
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Strengthening Civic Society Project	£742.50
Church of Ireland	Shared Future	£1,390
Conference of Religious Ireland	Joppa Project	£5,000
Down & Dromore Reconciliation Committee	Rwanda Visit – bursary costs	£5,000
Dungannon & District Clergy Forum	Strategic Plan	£2,950
Fermanagh Churches Forum	Programme 05-06	£800
Gilford & Tullyish Churches Together	Community BBQ	£1,400
Gilford & Tullyish Churches Together	Exploration of diversity of background	£2,100
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Christmas Weekend	£1,100
Linc Resource Centre	Linc/An Eochiar Initiative	£2,540
Linc Resource Centre	Creative Expressions	£1,396
Linc Resource Centre	Mobile Phone Network (P)	£1,492
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Inter-Church Group	£500
Immanuel Church of Ireland	Creating Community	£1,230
New Mossley Presbyterian Youth Club	Cross Community Weekend in Corrymeela	£1,500
Restoration Ministries	Difficult Conversations	£460
Restoration Ministries	Monthly Networking Meetings	£1,160
Church of Ireland	Hard Gospel Project	£2,292
Summer Madness	International Reconciliation Conference	£5,000

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
East Belfast Mission	Breaking the Cycle	£1,560
174 Trust	Staff & Management Training	£3,565

(I) 2004/05 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£175,950
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/ programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£20,500

(II) 2004/05 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Diocese of Derry and Raphoe	Peacebuilding Strategy Conference	£5,000
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Christmas Family Weekend	£1,000
Parish of Glenavy	150 years Celebration of Church Building	£200
Linc Resource Centre	Mount Vernon Young Men Awareness	£664
Linc Resource Centre	Community Relations Improvement	£1,835
P.C.I	Peacemaking Project 2005-08	£7,500
P.C.I	Day Conference	£1,836
East Belfast Mission	Past to Future	£3,450
Restoration Ministries	Difficult Conversation	£731
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Discussion Group	£550

(I) 2003/04 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£190,343
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/ programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£23,500

(II) 2003/04 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Churches Initiatives Group	Dealing with Past Grief Consultant	£1,500
COI Youth Council	Video Shorts Project	£3,270
COI Student Centre	Community Relations Evening Sessions	£805
Community Relations and Christians	Serviced Accommodation	£1,620
Community Relations and Christians	Courses on Moving Beyond Sectarianism	£1,320
Community Relations and Christians	Review and Development of Strategic Plan	£725
Cookstown Churches Forum	Series of religious talks	£590
Fermanagh Churches Forum	Bursaries to attend Corrymeela Residential	£510
ForthSpring Inter-Community Group	Study Visit	£2,244
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Various events	£500
Glenavy Parish	BBQ	£100
Glenavy Parish	Dialogue with local Orange Order	£500
Link Family & Community Centre	Action Research	£7,500
Lisburn YMCA	Millennium Volunteer Project	£4,005
Lisburn YMCA	Community Relations Project	£2,000
Knock Presbyterian Peace Group	Peace Building Weekend	£550
Gilnahirk/ St Colmcilles	Joint Reconciliation Venture to Botswana	£2,000
St Hilda's Church	Community Fun Day	£700

(I) 2002/03 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£199,358
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£19,831

(II) 2002/03 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Restoration Ministries	Hospitality Evenings	£3,645
Three Churches	Building Bridges of Understanding	£600
Restoration Ministries	Anam Cara Partners Hip Programme	£2,414

(I) 2001/02 CORE

Group	Purpose Of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£182,943
Forthspring	To provide a range of project/programme interventions to address the needs of the local community.	£22,650

2001/02 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Community Christians Together in Ballymena	Community Relations Residential	£1,600
Presbyterian Church Peace and Peacemaking Committee	One-day conference for Peace Agents form Presbyterian Church	£625
Revival Ministries	3 Day Residential Conference	£1,000
Church of Ireland Youth Council	Transforming the Community	£5,000
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Training and Support Conference for Congregational Peace Agents	£1,000
East Belfast Mission	Conference Costs	£2,000
Ballysillan Presbyterian Church	Meeting Costs (Cross Community Project)	£1,050
Leuenberg Church Fellowship	Conference on Reconciled Diversity	£400

(I) 2000/01 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£168,843

(II) 2000/01 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Community Restoration Ministries	Monthly Community Relations Event	£1,795
Methodist Church in Ireland	Churches support and work with victims of the Troubles	£400
Ards Presbyterian Christian Training & Resources Centre	Residential Conference	£500
Springfield Road Methodist Church	Four-day conference (Anglo-Irish Methodist Forum)	£500
Forthspring Inter Community Group	Training Programme/ Resource Book	£5,000
Dromore Presbytery Peacemaking Committee	The Gospel, Blame and New Relationships	£400
Roe Valley Clerical Study Group	Conference Costs	£200
Newtownabbey Methodist Mission	Community Audit	£3,850

1999/2000 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£176,288

(II) 1999/2000 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Dromore Presbytery Peacemaking Committee	Inter Church Meeting	£267.94
World Community for Christian Mediation	International Symposium	£5,000
Presbyterian Church Peace and Peacemaking Committee	Half day conference for clergy and lay leaders	£1,000
Lamb of God Community	Publish and distribute booklet ("Bridging the Gap")	£3,400
Community Relations & Christians	Series of plays and workshops	£2,500
South Down Ecumenical Clerical Study Group	Seminar costs	£380

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Linc Resource Centre	Publication of Document	£5,000
174 Trust	Conference Costs	£366.50

1998/99 CORE

Group	Purpose of Funding	Amount
Corrymeela	To advance reconciliation and healing through provision of residential facilities and programme activities.	£165,000

1998/99 PROJECT

Group	Project	Amount Awarded
Christian Fellowship Church Ards	Community Relations Audit	£2,000
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Conference- Facing Change	£1,275
Women in Faith	Conference Costs	£217.39
Craic with Christ	Programme Costs	£2,000
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Conference Costs	£1,000
Dromore Presbytery Peacemaking Committee	Series of meetings on Identity and the Bible	£230
Lamb of God Community	A Journey in Understanding Course	£200
Lamb of God Community	Programme Costs	£400
Townsend St Presbyterian Church	Study Day for Clergy on Community Relations	£200
Linc Resource Centre	Magazine Costs	£1,240
Forthspring	Spirituality Programme	£800
Lamb of God	Programme Costs	£400
Community Relations and Christians	Series of Talks	£400
174 Trust	Cross Community Celebration	£150

Community Relations Council

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the work it has undertaken to ensure that the Community Relations Council does not discriminate against any community when awarding (i) core; and (ii) project funding.

(AQW 1599/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Community Relations Council (CRC) is subject to all of the equality legislation that applies to public bodies.

Equality Legislation

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it defines sexual orientation when interpreting equality legislation.

(AQW 1604/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The interpretation of equality legislation is a matter for the courts. However, sexual orientation is defined in Regulation 2(1) of The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 and Regulation 2 (2) of The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 as meaning:-

“a sexual orientation towards:

- persons of the same sex;
- persons of the opposite sex;
- persons of the same sex and of the opposite sex.”

Capital Realisation Taskforce

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an overview of the recommendations made by the Capital Realisation Taskforce.

(AQO 860/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Capital Realisations Taskforce made recommendations to the Executive covering the following areas: -

- The quantum of assets that might be realised
- Structures to support the implementation of the Taskforce’s findings
- Developing an Asset Management Strategy
- Incentivisation of departments to realise underutilised assets
- The Creation of a Central Asset Register for public bodies
- The need for continuous assessment of market conditions
- The need to determine how the planning system can better support the realisation of public-sector assets.

Victims Groups

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the meetings attended by (i) the First Minister; and (ii) the Deputy First Minister, with representatives of victims’ groups, since devolution.

(AQW 1698/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Since assuming office on 8th May 2007, we have held meetings with the British Irish Rights Watch.

The deputy First Minister has met representatives of the Disabled Police Officers Association and from the Shankill Stress and Trauma Centre.

In addition, we have both met with the Consultative Group on the Past to discuss victims’ issues.

The Junior Ministers have also had regular meetings with a variety of victims’ groups.

Equality Provisions

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it interprets religious belief when implementing equality provisions including those in (i) the Northern Ireland Act 1998; (ii) UK equality legislation; and (iii) EU directives.

(AQW 1699/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Individual practices or observances resulting from religious belief are protected by both domestic and European equality law. However, it is for the courts and tribunals to determine how such practices and observances are protected in light of the particular issues and facts involved in each case. In determining such cases, courts and tribunals have to balance competing rights and interests.

Designation of Public Authorities

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list all ‘other persons’ designated as a public body in accordance with Section 75(3)(d) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

(AQW 1703/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Section 75(3)(d) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 states “any other person designated for the purposes of this section by order made by the Secretary of State”. Consequently this is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office. We would suggest that you write to the Secretary of State in this regard.

Equality Provisions

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its interpretation of ‘religious belief’ when implementing all equality provisions in (i) the Northern Ireland Act 1998; (ii) other UK equality legislation; and (iii) EU Directives. (AQW 1706/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The law often defines terms or expressions used in a statutory provision or applies definitions contained in other statutory provisions. For the purposes of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, section 98(1) of that Act provides that the term “religious belief” is to be construed in accordance with Article 2(3) of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (FETO). Article 2(3) of FETO provides that a reference to a person’s religious belief includes a reference to his supposed religious belief or the absence or supposed absence of any particular religious belief.

In relation to EU law, the definition of religious belief in FETO has been further clarified to comply with the requirements of the “religion or belief” strands of Council Directive 2000/78/EC. The Fair Employment and Treatment Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 inserted a definition of “religious belief” into Article 2(2) of FETO. That definition defines religious belief as including “any religion or similar philosophical belief”. No further explanation of the terms “religion” or “similar philosophical belief” is offered in FETO. Ultimately, it falls to the courts and tribunals to rule on what is meant by “religious belief” as a matter of domestic or Community law.

Display of Flags

Mr A Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it has given to a re-examination of the current inter-agency protocol for the display of flags in public areas; and what plans it has to progress this matter. (AQW 1785/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The inter-agency Flags Protocol that was launched prior to devolution in 2005 is still current and operational. The preliminary work that began earlier this summer on the review of the Protocol will continue.

We hope that you are reassured that the current protocol will continue to be implemented as it presently stands.

We also hope that our approach to the review of the Protocol, on foot of the outcome of the wider consultation on the Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration can be seen as adding to the effectiveness of the review.

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Woodland Trust’s Vision for Woodland in Northern Ireland, and if it recognises that the proposals in the report could deliver on many of the Executive’s commitments. (AQW 1851/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The ‘Vision for Woodland’ document presents a useful perspective on the environmental and social aspects of forestry. We believe that this provides useful commentary in support of the Forestry Strategy ‘Northern Ireland Forestry, A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth’ produced by the Forest Service in 2006, and it can help inform decision-making in relation to sustainable development.

Capital Realisation Taskforce

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if (i) the Capital Realisation Taskforce report has been released under the Freedom of Information Act; and (ii) their Department intends to publish it. (AQW 1855/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

A copy of the report of Capital Realisations Taskforce has been released under the Freedom of Information Act.

We are considering the issue of general publication of this report.

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the Department acknowledges the importance of a woodland creation target in delivering on the commitment to enhance the natural environment, as part of the Sustainable Development Strategy. (AQW 1914/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

We recognise the valuable role that the forestry industry plays within the rural economy and the potential opportunities emerging through the developing renewable energy crops sector. We also understand the widespread social and environmental benefits afforded by woodlands. The importance of a woodland creation target, within the context of the Northern Ireland Forestry Strategy, is considered an important part of the Sustainable Development Strategy.

Regeneration of Ebrington Site

Mr Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a progress update on regeneration of the Ebrington site in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 1917/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: ILEX, the urban regeneration company owned jointly by this Department and the Department for Social Development, has responsibility for the redevelopment of the Ebrington site in Derry/Londonderry and we are pleased to report substantial progress.

An extensive Masterplan was published in October 2006 outlining the vision for the development of the former military barracks. The key to delivering this will be the appointment of a private sector development partner to attract investment. This appointment is expected to be made next year.

In the meantime, a major demolition programme is now complete, as is detailed work to restore the 19th century Star Fort. Planning applications have been lodged for the refurbishment of some of the listed buildings. Work is also well underway to design the infrastructure for the site, for example, the competitive tender competition for the Parade Ground design will be advertised shortly.

A key development for Ebrington and for the city as a whole will be the outcome of the EU funding bid for the proposed pedestrian and cycle bridge across the Foyle to link the Waterside with the Cityside between Ebrington and the Guildhall. An announcement is expected shortly.

Sustainable Development Commissioner

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it is expected that an appointment will be made to the post of Sustainable Development Commissioner. (AQO 874/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We view the appointment of a local Commissioner to 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 are currently considering the ways in which we can most effectively take this matter forward in support of our long-term plans and priorities for sustainable development.

Public Procurement

Mrs McGill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the role public

procurement can play in achieving the PfG commitments to redress poverty. (AQO 896/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) and ISNI Strategy are very clear about the role that public procurement can play in redressing poverty.

We are about promoting greater employment opportunities in rural areas and disadvantaged communities.

We are about developing new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.

We will ensure that the reforms and restructuring will be compliant with recognised best practice in social procurement guidelines.

We will be seeking to have in place employment plans; building opportunities for apprenticeships into major delivery contracts – helping those eager to develop key skills valued in the workplace – and all done through a tendering process that prioritises the most economically advantageous option, seeking to maximise the social and employment opportunities for all our people.

From that it will be clear that public-sector procurement can play an active and effective role in the process of tackling patterns of socio-economic disadvantage.

Public-sector procurement expenditure by Northern Ireland Departments, their Agencies, Non-Departmental Public Bodies and Public Corporations, accounted for approximately £2.2 billion of supplies, services and construction works in 2007-2008. The leverage provided by this level of spend will provide significant opportunities to support the delivery of the Executive's priorities, set out in the Programme for Government 2008-2011.

Public procurement therefore has an important role to play in regeneration and achieving socio-economic objectives whilst adhering to legal requirements. It is a challenging area for government which we must seek to exploit in developing the Executive's Regional Economic Strategy and taking forward poverty initiatives.

Guidance on integrating Equality of Opportunity and Sustainable Development in Public Sector Procurement was launched on 29 May 2008. The guidance provides practical advice and case studies for policy makers and practitioners to assist them to more effectively integrate equality of opportunity and sustainable development considerations into public-sector procurement.

Although the guidance has been developed by Central Procurement Directorate, working in conjunction with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, it is for

individual Departments to determine how best to apply it in their respective business areas.

It is this implementation of the guidance, supported by appropriate training, which will support the Executive's approach in delivering its priorities under the Programme for Government.

Junior Ministers

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what role the junior Ministers have in relation to children and young people.

(AQO 887/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Junior Ministers have responsibility for the co-ordination of policy which impacts on children's and young people's lives and their role is to ensure these issues remain high on Government's agenda.

To achieve this, they jointly chair the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People which has been established by the Executive. The Sub-Committee has identified and is taking forward six key priority areas for action.

The Junior Ministers are also driving forward implementation of the 10-Year Strategy for Children and Young People. They chair a Strategy Planning and Review Group, which includes key statutory, voluntary and community sector representatives, who are working on the next three year strategy action plan.

The Junior Ministers have a twelve month work plan, a key aspect of which is leading engagement by the Executive with children and young people, and hearing their views and opinions. As part of this role, they hosted a Youth Debate on anti-social behaviour in the Assembly on 23 October with 140 young people aged between 11 and 17. This event was ground breaking as it was the first time this Chamber had been used in this way. The event was a great success with Junior Ministers actively engaging with the young people and taking away their ideas and suggestions for further consideration.

The Junior Ministers will also be meeting with the OFMDFM Committee on 5th November 2008 to discuss their work plan and a range of issues concerning Children and Young People. This will include the work of the Ministerial Sub-Committee and the draft children and young people's strategy action plan.

Executive Meetings

Mr Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what emergency procedures exist to cope with the situation that has arisen because

of the inability of the Executive to meet since June.

(AQO 824/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The procedure set out in paragraph 2.14 of the Ministerial Code enables any Minister to seek agreement to a decision which is required to be taken so urgently as not to be able to await consideration at the next Executive Committee meeting.

Public Service Agreement

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it will deliver on PSA 21, enabling efficient government, when the Executive has not met for over 3 months.(AQO 928/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

OFMDFM has lead responsibility for co-ordinating the delivery across relevant departments of PSA 21. In that capacity, OFMDFM has worked closely with contributing departments to develop a detailed Delivery Agreement to ensure the successful achievement of the objectives, commitments and targets set out in PSA 21. As a result, all targets set out under PSA 21 for OFMDFM are on track for achievement.

Conflict Transformation Centre

Mr McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the expected cost of the Conflict Transformation Centre at the Maze.

(AQO 851/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The estimated capital cost for the proposed International Centre for Conflict Transformation as outlined in the 2006 Masterplan for Maze/Long Kesh is £10.2m. This is very much a broad order of cost pending detailed specification and design, and would require updating.

Business Awaiting Consideration by Executive

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the scale and scope of outstanding business awaiting consideration by the Executive.

(AQO 878/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Ministers have brought forward a number of matters for consideration by the Executive. However, it is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers, including draft papers, is confidential.

Strategic Review of the Parades Commission

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on its response to the interim consultative report by the Strategic Review of the Parades Commission. (AQO 847/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:
We have met with Lord Ashdown and members of the Strategic Review of Parading Body Commission about the interim consultative report on the 6 October 2008 and we will consider their recommendations when the final report is published.

Capital and Revenue Projects

Ms J McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with all Departments to ensure they bring forward their capital and revenue projects to secure jobs and help alleviate the financial difficulties in households and businesses in the present economic downturn. (AQO 902/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:
The Executive is determined to deliver the Investment Strategy to the fullest extent possible within the constraints of the funding available to us.

We are exploring urgently with departments, the Strategic Investment Board and others how the Executive can maximise the pace of delivery of the Investment Strategy over the Budget period.

Emerald Fund

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the Emerald Fund. (AQO 879/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

To date the Emerald Fund has not been accessed in relation to public-sector projects.

The fund is not an additional resource that can be used by departments to increase their net spending power. Whilst it is potentially another source of monies for the private sector alongside established commercial options used to finance infrastructure projects, it cannot be used to increase the expenditure allocations contained in the Budget.

We understand that the Emerald Fund's interests include areas of infrastructure provision that fall within the private sector such as energy and telecommunications.

NI Bureau in Washington

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what contact it has had with the NI Bureau in Washington on the impact of the credit crunch on US inward investment in Northern Ireland. (AQO 826/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:
The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is in close contact with the Northern Ireland Bureau and InvestNI on the current economic situation and its potential impact on inward investment from the United States (US). The Bureau recently facilitated a visit by Junior Minister Donaldson and Junior Minister Kelly to the US during which they had the opportunity to meet with a range of key interests in the corporate and business sectors and to discuss the current economic situation and its potential impact on inward investment. The Ministers used the opportunity to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location and the advantages for US based companies and investors doing business here. The Bureau will continue to work closely with InvestNI in monitoring developments.

Post-Primary Education

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Executive will take a decision on the future of post-primary education. (AQO 853/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:
It is not possible at this time to indicate when the Executive will take a decision on the future of post-primary education.

Credit Crunch

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the contribution it has made to alleviate the impact of the credit crunch. (AQO 871/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: To date we have hosted a series of 'Cost of Living' meetings with the Banking, Construction, Business and Energy sectors as well as the Utility Regulator and Trade Unions to gather information on the impact of the present difficult financial situation on local social and economic interests. We also are meeting with representatives from the Social and Voluntary sector. These meetings have proved to be useful in providing a forum for each sector to give us their view on where difficulties exist and to discuss how we can best protect local interests in the current adverse economic conditions.

We would anticipate completing our series of stakeholder meetings over the next few weeks. We are currently consolidating a paper on the issues raised during these meetings as well as tracking initiatives already put forward by Executive Ministers. We hope to put a consolidated paper to the Executive in November. The complexities of the economic crisis do not allow simple or quick fixes. This is an issue we will need to keep under review as it develops, and tailor our responses appropriately. For this reason we are keen to see this matter as a standing item of Executive business.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Electronic Identification Tagging

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the future of the sheep industry if electronic identification tagging is introduced. (AQW 1505/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): I understand and appreciate the challenges that our sheep industry will face in successfully implementing a system of electronic identification for sheep. However, we must introduce an electronic identification system from 31 December 2009, as it is an obligation under EU law.

While electronic identification will help to reduce the cost of any future disease outbreak insofar as it will help secure effective traceability there is no question that it will also place a financial burden on keepers, as electronic tags are slightly more expensive than conventional ear tags, and some keepers will also need to purchase electronic readers. I would, however, point out that for many of our keepers electronic identification of sheep could be as simple as applying electronic tags and recording information manually. Under EU legislation, keepers have a choice of whether they wish to record information electronically, or not.

We have secured several transitional arrangements through lobbying the Commission, which will phase in individual recording requirements between 2010 and 2012. These changes will allow further time for the industry to adapt to the new arrangements and will help to reduce the record keeping burden, particularly with regard to older animals which are not electronically identified. Discussions on other technical aspects are also ongoing.

Electronic identification of sheep can deliver on-farm benefits by not only reducing the risk of human error in recording animal details, but by providing efficiency

benefits in farm management and animal breeding for keepers who are able to adopt on-farm software and electronic sheep handling equipment. Electronic identification provides the potential to modernise farms and make record keeping easier. I have made funding available for this under the Farm Modernisation Measure of the NI Rural Development Programme.

For the wider industry, there are significant potential benefits that may be realised if we integrate electronic identification with existing APHIS infrastructure in abattoirs and markets, including more effective control of any serious disease outbreak and potential access to higher value markets.

My officials will continue working closely with the authorities in the South and in Britain, and with industry, to identify practical solutions to reduce the burden on keepers and to realise the opportunities that electronic identification represents.

New Technology in Rural Areas

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what assistance both financial and otherwise, is available for inventors of new technology in rural areas. (AQW 1557/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, Measure 3.1 (Diversification into Non-Agricultural Activity) provides £20 million to support members of farm households who wish to diversify into non-agricultural activities, while Measure 3.2 (Micro-business Creation and Development) provides a further £20 million to new or existing micro-businesses in a non-agricultural sector for the creation of employment developing the economic infrastructure in rural areas.

Under these measures, assistance will be available to individuals and private businesses, including the social economy, for projects in rural areas to help new businesses become established or existing businesses to consolidate or expand, including for technical support, bespoke training, capital and resource costs and marketing support. This could include new technologies.

The Axis will be delivered through a bottom-up approach, with local councils working together with Local Action Groups to set priorities for their area. This mechanism will ensure that funding decisions are made by local people, within a competitive process, in line with the priorities set in a locally developed strategy. The Department and its Delivery Agents will also work with other Agencies to assist entrepreneurs to develop the skills for a successful business start-up, thus reducing risks.

In addition I am advised by the Department for Employment and Learning that, while it does not offer any direct financial support for inventors of new technology, in some instances Further Education colleges can offer expertise to mentor and support industries and individuals that are key to the region's development.

Organic Farming Scheme

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to review the level of payment given to farmers under the Organic Farming Scheme contained within the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme. (AQW 1564/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There are currently no imminent plans to review the level of payment given to farmers within the Organic Farming Scheme.

If a robust economic argument is put forward in relation to any of the proposed payment rates, then my Department will certainly consider it.

Other than that, the Scheme, as part of the NI Rural Development Plan, will be looked at again within the Programme's 2010 mid-term review.

Red Meat Industry Task Force Report

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much money has been sought by her Department for the red meat industry, following the publication of the Red Meat Industry Task Force Report. (AQW 1565/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I would like first of all to put this issue in context. Significant funding is already available to the sector. The Single Farm Payment which is available up to 2013 at least provides direct funding to farmers and represents substantial transitional support to underpin the sector. This is important and provides the industry with a good opportunity to address the need for change.

Whilst I appreciate that there are significant challenges facing the red meat industry and I know that it would like additional support, the reality is that there is a finite pot of money. Nevertheless as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review my Department has put in bids totalling £15m Capital Grant in respect of 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11, to implement any schemes which may arise from the recommendations of the Task Force Report. To date we have not been successful on this front but that does not deter our willingness and commitment to support the industry. Consequently a further bid for £5m was recently submitted to DFP as part of their Strategic Stocktake

review in respect of 2009/10 and 2010/11 for potential capital grant schemes to support the red meat industry.

I also wish to advise that the industry receives significant support from Government through AFBI and CAFRE. In addition, other funds are available to it under the Rural Development Programme.

Dairy Products

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with (i) the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and (ii) other devolved administrations in the United Kingdom, to lobby the European Union on the reintroduction of export refunds on dairy products. (AQW 1566/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A key issue relating to this topic is that fact the 2003 CAP reform agreement introduced a dairy premium and additional payment payable annually to producers (now incorporated in the Single Farm Payment). Whilst this aspect of the agreement was welcomed by producers, the quid pro quo measure was a reduction in intervention prices. The overall aim was to bring EU prices closer to world market prices and to reduce the need for export refunds. This means that the Commission is obliged to adhere to the CAP Reform agreement and accordingly cannot artificially support prices for milk powders above intervention prices.

I note that the data presented at the last meeting of the EU Management Committee confirmed that EU milk powder prices were above intervention prices. In view of this Member States did not have a sound basis to request the Commission to reintroduce export refunds and I understand that in the interim prices have remained above intervention levels.

Whilst I share the industry's concern about the current weak markets for milk powders, I trust that you will appreciate that it would not be appropriate at this stage to use valuable negotiating capital with other Agriculture Departments on this issue. That said, I can assure you that the situation is being carefully monitored and, if necessary, I will lobby strongly with the Secretary of State for DEFRA to ensure that the North's circumstances are fully taken into account.

Since the 2003 CAP Reform our dairy industry has been at a crossroad. When it became clear that export refunds would play a much less significant role in returns for dairy products some processors took steps to move to the processing of higher added value products. I welcome this development and would encourage all processors to follow a market-led approach by moving away from basic commodity production to higher value products. Only in this way will the dairy industry reduce its vulnerability

to volatile world markets and continue to make an important contribution to the local agri-food industry.

Compensation for Farmers

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what conacre payments will be included within any scheme to compensate farmers, after the flooding on 16 August 2008. (AQW 1567/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is currently no compensation available or reimbursement for crop or other losses. However, I have agreed in principle to the payment of a one-off hardship payment under EC de minimis rules (not based on specific cost elements) to those farmers affected by the flooding on 16 August, subject to affordability and business case considerations. I intend to make my assessment available to the Executive in order to secure the support of Ministerial colleagues on the way forward.

Wind Energy for Rural Businesses Scheme

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what criteria were used to appoint personnel to carry out the review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses scheme. (AQW 1568/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The identification of personnel to conduct the review was based on the desire for the appointee to have knowledge and experience of European Funding and the Rural Development Programme, but with no connection past or present with the administration or implementation of the WERB Scheme. The individual chosen to lead the review meets these criteria and also has had experience of audit work. He is currently employed within the Central Services Group in the Department. He was assisted in this task by individuals within his own Branch and Service Delivery Group, together with a professional engineer who was appointed to assess the technical and contractual aspects of the WERB Scheme.

Single Farm Payment

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Single Farm Payment decisions, determined by Independent Review Panels (i) in favour of the appellant; and (ii) in favour of her Department, were overthrown by her since taking up office. (AQW 1581/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The External Panel do not make decisions in relation to the Single Farm Payment scheme. Their remit is to provide an external view of my Department's decisions and make a recommendation. The final decision in relation to Stage 2 of the Review of Decisions process rests with my Department.

Since taking office, 104 decisions in relation to Single Farm Payment Stage 2 Review of Decisions applications have been made. Of these 99 Panel recommendations have been accepted and are broken down as follows:

- 89 cases which the Panel recommended should be rejected,
- 5 cases which the Panel recommended should be upheld, and
- 5 cases which the Panel recommended should be partially upheld.

In the remaining 5 cases, the Panel recommended that 4 should be upheld, these recommendations were not accepted. In 1 case the Panel recommended that the case should be rejected, this case was upheld in part.

Purchased Cattle

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to remove the 30 day holding rule for purchased cattle; and to detail the benefits of this rule to the agriculture industry. (AQW 1582/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have no plans to remove the 30 day restriction on imported cattle, which is a vital component in our efforts to prevent bluetongue entering and becoming established here.

With the exception of the South, which is free from bluetongue, certain conditions apply in the case of cattle and sheep imported from any area of GB and mainland Europe to ensure good biosecurity is achieved and that the animal is not affected by bluetongue.

Animals imported for breeding and production are required to be isolated; housed in a house which has been cleansed, disinfected and treated with insecticide; and restricted until they have two clear bluetongue tests.

In the case of cattle these tests are carried out around 7 and 30 days post import; and for sheep at around 15 days and 30 days. Anyone intending to import animals is made aware of these conditions in advance and is provided with advice on biosecurity. We undertake these measures in order to protect the agriculture industry here from bluetongue.

The current veterinary risk assessment states that the greater threat of bluetongue coming here is from the importation of infected animals. The recent cases of bluetongue infected animals imported to England and Wales from Europe demonstrates that this threat is very real.

It is because of this risk that I have repeatedly encouraged the industry not to import stock from high risk areas. It is also why I have put in place measures to allow us to quickly identify any infected animals imported and reduce the risk of spreading infection to neighbouring flocks and herds.

Rivers Agency

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the work carried out by the Rivers Agency, as a result of the floods during the summer, in (i) Moyle District Council area; (ii) Ballymoney Borough Council area; and (iii) Ballymena Borough Council area; and to detail the associated costs of the work undertaken.

(AQW 1633/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As a result of the extreme flooding event experienced on 16 and 17 August 2008 the Rivers Agency has to date carried out emergency repair to existing flood defences and removal of debris works totalling £12,750 in the Moyle District Council area, £3,000 in the Ballymoney Borough Council area and £11,750 in the Ballymena Borough Council area. Further to this, repair works following flood damage are ongoing and the Agency is in the process of commissioning a number of studies throughout all affected areas.

Feasibility Studies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many feasibility studies have been carried out, following the flooding during the summer, in (i) Moyle District Council area; (ii) Ballymoney Borough Council area; and (iii) Ballymena Borough Council area. (AQW 1634/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: DARD Rivers Agency has not yet completed any feasibility studies in the Moyle, Ballymoney or Ballymena Council areas relating to the flooding on 16 and 17 August 2008. Such studies are by their nature complex and far reaching, and may take some time to complete.

The Agency has been very active in all areas affected by the widespread and extreme flooding experienced on 16 August 2008. It has been investigating

all watercourse-related flooding incidents of which it has been aware. Where rapid and practical solutions to flooding problems have been achievable, the Agency has completed such works. And where other minor works have been required, the Agency has, where possible, carried out such works in order to alleviate the risk of future flooding.

With regard to more extensive flooding problems the Agency has commissioned studies relating to several of the locations affected by the flooding. Furthermore, it is in the process of commissioning a large number of studies throughout all the remaining affected areas.

The Agency recognises that there have been flooding problems within the 3 Council areas mentioned and is committed to resolving problems for which there is a cost-effective solution. It will address these in due course as resources permit.

Farming Industry

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide provisional cost estimates of damage caused by flooding on 16 August 2008 to the farming industry in the Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 1747/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am unable to provide a cost breakdown for the Upper Bann constituency area. However, for the Upper Bann and Lagan river catchment areas the estimated losses are £97,000, and £66,000 in respect of potatoes and cereals. These figures are based on input costs.

Forest Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of new hectares of forestry planted by Forest Service, each year since 1970.[R] (AQW 1748/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Details of annual Forest Service new planting from 1973 to March 2008 are shown in the table below. No records of planting from 1970 to 1973 are held.

FOREST SERVICE NEW PLANTING

Year	Hectares of New Planting
1973 - 1974	1492
1974 - 1975	1063
1975 - 1976	977

Year	Hectares of New Planting
1976 - 1977	998
Apr to Dec 1977	968
1977 -1978	945
1978 - 1979	715
1979 - 1980	714
1980 - 1981	641
1981 - 1982	720
1982 - 1983	638
1983 - 1984	628
1984 - 1985	725
1985 - 1986	638
1986 - 1987	568
1987 - 1988	585
1988 - 1989	623
1989 - 1990	561
1990 - 1991	600
1991 - 1992	426
1992 - 1993	422
1993 - 1994	365
1994 - 1995	296
1995 - 1996	158
1996 - 1997	140
1997 - 1998	94
1998 - 1999	112
1999 - 2000	196
2000 - 2001	87
2001 - 2002	61
2002 - 2003	79
2003 - 2004	89
2004 - 2005	13
2005 - 2006	14
2006 - 2007	0
2007 - 2008	15

Total: 17,366 hectares

Forest Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of new hectares of short rotation coppice planted by the Forest Service, each year since 1995. (AQW 1750/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Forest Service has not planted any Short Rotation Coppice.

Flood Damage

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 833/09, when she will conclude her consideration of funding options available following her Department's assessment of flood damage to the river catchment areas of (i) Moyola; (ii) Lagan; (iii) Upper Bann; (iv) Blackwater; (v) Maine; and (vi) Sixmilewater.

(AQW 1760/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have agreed in principle to the payment of a one – off hardship payment under EC de minimis rules to those farmers affected by the flooding on 16 August, subject to affordability and business case considerations. I intend to make my assessment available shortly to the Executive in order to secure the support of Ministerial colleagues on the way forward.

Rivers Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions officials from the Rivers Agency had with local farmers in relation to the Clea Lakes in Killyleagh; and to detail any agreements reached. (AQW 1772/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency officials have not met with farmers to reach any agreement about the Clea Lakes. At the request of parties who had declared an interest Rivers Agency met to explain where responsibility lay for the control of lake levels and how Rivers Agency may consider taking over control if there was satisfactory legal transfer of rights from the current owners. There has been no legal transfer to date.

Tree Felling Licences

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the introduction of tree felling licenses. (AQW 1795/09)

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 by means of a felling licence. Formal, detailed instructions will be issued to the Office of the Legislative 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.

Forestry Policy

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will revisit 'Northern Ireland, A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth', to address all strategic issues that affect forestry policy, including (i) the protection and restoration of ancient woodland; (ii) climate change and its impact on woodland; and (iii) how government can deliver native woodland creation to benefit both the public and wildlife.

(AQW 1828/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am content that NI Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth reflects an appropriate balance between the many views which were expressed during the policy review, and has settled future forest policy.

The Strategy does not contain some of the details which you seek, but is a high level document which points to how the agreed policy will be taken forward. The Strategy does indicate that Forest Service will consider drawing up more focussed strategies, in consultation with stakeholders, and as part of its normal business cycle.

Forest Service developed recently a strategy for the management of Departmental woodland identified on the ancient woodland inventory. Management of this woodland will be reviewed in conjunction with Forest Service periodic review of forest plans, based on the ecological potential of the woodland, indicated by the presence or absence of ancient woodland remnant features, and features which reinforce habitat networks. This assessment will form the basis of whether and where to restore a site to native woodland.

In relation to evidence on impact of climate change on forestry, Forest Service engages with a wide range of organisations such as the Scottish and NI Forum For Environmental Research (SNIFFER), COFORD (National Council for Forest Research and Development), WWF and Forestry Commission in relation to research and the communication of research findings in this emerging field.

Forest Service provides grant aid and advice to help landowners create new native woodland under the Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) and Farm Woodland Premium Scheme. This is guided by the publication earlier this year by Forest Service of the Native Woodland definitions and Guidance booklet, produced by the Native Woodland Group. The booklet provides important information in relation to native species, native woodland, new native woodland, local provenance and the use of

natural colonisation as a means of creating new native woodland. Forest Service also monitors the creation of grant-aided new native woodland by priority woodland type and updates the Native Woodland Group and the NI Biodiversity Report. Between 1999 and 2006, 571 hectares of new native woodland were created under the WGS and native woodland is becoming an increasingly popular option for those creating new woodlands.

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that Northern Ireland is the least wooded region of Europe, what plans Forest Service has to increase on woodland creation; and what financial incentives are available to private landowners.

(AQW 1831/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Forest Service "Strategy for Sustainability and Growth", published in March 2006, identified forest expansion as a key policy aim and stated the aim of doubling the area of forest in the North over a 50 year period. New planting will be achieved primarily through the conversion of privately owned agricultural land, supported by funds made available under the Rural Development Programme. The Strategy recognised that farmers have a strong commitment to farming which means that forest expansion is likely to be slow at first, however, my Department is committed to a programme of encouraging woodland expansion.

In addition to provision of planting grants, Forest Service has introduced a Publicity and Marketing Strategy to highlight the benefits of woodland ownership, produced an indicative map showing where new woodland could be potentially the best long term land use and will carry out a study identifying the main barriers affecting expansion and how these may be overcome.

The establishment of new woodland is primarily encouraged through two grant schemes: the Woodland Grant Scheme and the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme. New planting under the Woodland Grant Scheme is grant aided at a rate of up to £1850 per hectare for areas of 0.2 hectare and over, paid in two instalments.

In addition to the Woodland Grant Scheme, farmers may receive annual payments through the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme to compensate for agricultural income foregone by creating woodland. Each application must be for at least one hectare and payments are made for either 10 or 15 years, depending on the trees planted and how they will be managed.

The rates of annual payment range from £60 - £270 per hectare depending on the category of land being planted and whether it falls inside or outside the Less Favoured Areas (LFA).

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to afford absolute legislative protection to all ancient and long established woodland. (AQW 1833/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has no plans to afford absolute legislative protection to all ancient and long established woodland.

At present, proposal to change woodland to another land use, not subject to a planning permission process, are covered by the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations (NI) 2006. However, a new Forestry Bill to replace the Forestry Act (NI) 1953 is currently being drafted, which will contain a provision to regulate the felling and regeneration of woodlands by means of a licence.

The licence will compel forest owners to manage woodlands in a sustainable manner, including the timing and extent of felling, and the composition of regenerating woodlands. A consideration for any such licence will be whether the woodland in question appears on the ancient woodland inventory.

The new Forestry Bill should be ready for introduction to the Assembly in March/April 2009, most likely after the Easter recess.

Likewise the Department of Environment's Planning and Environmental Policy Group (PEPG) has no plans to bring forward legislative protection for ancient and long-established woodland.

However, PEPG is currently considering how to bring forward policy protection to ancient and long-established woodland from development proposals as part of the review of Planning Policy Statement 2: Planning and Nature Conservation.

Currently, in considering whether or not to grant planning permission the Department of the Environment's Planning Service will have regard to the ancient woodlands inventory map as one of a number of material planning considerations.

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will restore all planted ancient woodland sites under the Forest Service's stewardship, as part of the commitment to arrest biodiversity decline. (AQW 1834/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department cannot restore all plantations on ancient woodland sites because there is insufficient evidence of an economic, social or

environmental requirement for such a target and there are no clearly defined means by which such a target could be achieved. However, the Department accepts the principle of restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites and has recently developed a strategy for the management of ancient woodland identified on the Woodland Trust's Ancient Woodland Inventory published in 2007.

Management of this woodland is reviewed in conjunction with Forest Service plans, based on the presence, or absence, of ancient woodland remnant features and features which reinforce habitat networks.

Environmental and Rural Development Fund

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to (i) confirm that on 27 February 2006 the Northern Ireland Secretary of State launched a £59.2m Environmental and Rural Development Fund; and (ii) provide a breakdown of how her Department directed this allocation. (AQW 1903/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In February 2006, the NI Secretary Of State launched a £59.2m Environmental and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF). This was a two-year fund managed by DETI to pump-prime the adoption of renewable energy technologies in an attempt to stimulate the market. This Fund should not be confused with the funding to support the NI Rural Development Plan.

I understand that you have asked a similar question to DETI and they will be able to provide a breakdown as to how the total fund was allocated.

However, you may wish to note DARD was successful in a number of bids from the EREF, totalling £4.2 million over the two year period namely:-

- Funding for the creation of a renewable energy centre of excellence within the DARD estate at the Hillsborough site of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. Capital costs of £0.995m in 2006/07 and £1.35m in 2007/08.
- Funding for research and development in renewable energy technologies. Revenue of £0.5m in 2006/07 and £0.75m 2007/08.
- Funding for CAFRE to take forward a technology transfer programme on renewable energy programmes to increase awareness of sustainable issues among the rural community and enhance its knowledge to exploit the opportunities that currently exist. Revenue of £0.1m in 2006/07 and £0.15m in 2007/08.

- Establishment of demonstration projects within CAFRE at a capital cost of £0.2m in 2006/07 and £0.15m in 2007/08.

Tree Felling Licences

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to introduce tree felling licences. (AQW 1909/09)

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 by means of a felling licence. Formal, detailed instructions will be issued to the Office of the Legislative 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.

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development since 35% of the planted ancient woodlands sites are in private ownership, what plans her Department has to increase financial incentives for restoring these sites. (AQW 1911/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Although a significant proportion of planted ancient woodland sites are in private ownership, this in itself does not create a need to alter the arrangements under which the Department supports private forestry.

Based on the results of the 2007 Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI), the majority of privately owned planted AWI woodland already consists of broadleaved or mixed conifer-broadleaved woodland. Within this kind of mixed woodland type, the extent to which ancient woodland features, including native woodland ground flora and veteran trees, are under threat from shading, is generally quite low.

While there are no plans to increase the levels of incentives available to private landowners, that are specifically for restoration of Ancient Woodlands, the Department already provides support under a number of forestry and agri-environment grant schemes that are also applicable to these sites

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will commit to creating a

national inventory of all woodland sites to measure the success of the target to double woodland cover contained within the 2006 forestry strategy for sustainability and growth. (AQW 1912/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Forest Service maintains an accurate and detailed inventory of woodland managed by the Department and updates this on an annual basis. Currently this covers approximately 70% of forest area in the North. The basis for determining the area of non-Forest Service woodland comes from a private woodland inventory carried out by Forest Service in the late 1970s. This is periodically updated to take account of new areas of woodland created under Woodland Grant Schemes.

Forest Service acknowledge some limitations in the current approach, particularly the estimates around new private woodland created outside forestry grant schemes. Forest Service will consider using other available woodland information to provide more comprehensive inventory data, allowing changes in woodland cover over the long term to be more fully captured.

Woodland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the target in the Programme for Government does not commit to the figure of 17,400 hectares of new woodland planted annually, to double woodland cover. (AQW 1915/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Doubling our woodland cover will require an additional 86,000 hectares of woodland to be created over the next 50 years, primarily by conversion of privately owned agricultural land to woodland with support provided under the Rural Development Programme.

The Forestry Strategy acknowledges a strong desire among farmers to continue farming, which means that woodland expansion is likely to be slow at first and hence the Programme for Government targets were set at 1,650 hectares over a three year period at the rate of 550 hectares per year. In the longer term, as the reform of CAP gains momentum and growing more woodland becomes attractive to landowners it is anticipated that the demand for forestry grant schemes will increase.

The target of 1650 ha recognises the likely rate of afforestation in the current circumstances and that expected within the programme for Government period.

Compensation for Crops Lost

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the discussions she

has had with the Ulster Farmers' Union to provide compensation for crops lost in the Strangford constituency, due to bad weather. (AQW 1975/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I met with the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) on 21 August in the aftermath of the severe flooding of 16 August to discuss the way forward in terms of assessing damage on farms. I have had no discussions with UFU specific to the Strangford constituency.

New Clondeboy Yoghurt

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of the new Clondeboy Yoghurt; and what practical and financial assistance her Department has given to promote this new business. (AQW 1976/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am aware of the new Clondeboy Estate yoghurt and met some of those involved with the business at the 2007 NI. Food & Drink Association Awards.

My Department, through the College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) at Loughry Campus, provided significant practical assistance to Clondeboy Estate to develop its yoghurt products. The yoghurts were initially manufactured at Loughry under its Pre-Incubation Programme and test marketed. Loughry continues to provide technical support and staff training for the business.

At the invitation of my Department, the company participated in a prestigious 'Slowfood' event in Belfast in May 2007, promoting artisan food producers and their products.

The Company has also received advice from the Department on the financial assistance available under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 and has recently made an application to the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme.

International Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost to her Department of co-sponsoring the International Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition, hosted by Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute Conference on 29 and 30 October 2008 at the Slieve Donard Hotel. (AQW 2113/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development agreed to host a pre-conference

dinner at which I presented the Departmental policy on renewable energy. The final cost of this dinner is not yet available, but is estimated to be approximately £2,000. As part of this sponsorship arrangement, the Department's College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) was also provided with exhibition space at the Conference free of charge to promote its work in renewables.

Rose Energy and Invest NI

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she and her officials were aware that her Department was co-sponsoring an event, in partnership with Rose Energy and Invest NI, organised by Morrow Communications who are working as public relations consultants for Rose Energy. (AQW 2114/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: DARD was aware that both Rose Energy and Invest NI were two of seven sponsors of the AFBI International Renewable Energy Conference and that Morrow Communications was engaged to provide event management services. This was an international scientific conference looking at a range of renewable energy technologies. AFBI procured event management services through a robust public procurement exercise. The event management services did not include sponsorship raising activities.

I am aware of the Rose Energy proposal for a chicken litter incinerator. Whilst the decision relating to planning approval for this project rests with another Department, it is on public record that I would support a public enquiry into this matter so that the views of farmers, local residents and all those potentially affected by this development are taken into consideration.

International Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there is a conflict of interest in relation to her Department's co-sponsorship of the International Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition, because of the involvement of Invest NI, Rose Energy and Morrow Communications, who are organising the conference and working as public relations consultants for Rose Energy on its incinerator proposal. (AQW 2115/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am not aware of any conflict of interest in relation to DARD's sponsorship of the pre-conference dinner at AFBI International Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition due to the involvement of Invest NI, Rose Energy and

Morrow Communications. The appointment by AFBI of Morrow Communications as the event management company for the Conference was managed by a centre of procurement excellence, with a specific focus on methodology, experience and costs during the procurement process. Morrow Communications had no responsibility for raising sponsorship.

Sponsorship services were awarded to another consultancy company on the basis of a separate public procurement exercise.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Commemorations of the Plantation of Ulster

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans have been made for the upcoming commemorations of the Plantation of Ulster.

(AQW 1461/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell): A number of organisations supported by my Department are involved in facilitating a variety of activities in relation to the Plantation of Ulster. These include a documentary series, exhibitions, and the publication of educational resources.

Receptions Hosted By Minister

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list all the receptions he has hosted, since taking up office.

(AQW 1478/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have hosted 8 receptions since taking up office. These are outlined below.

- Senior International Series of Women's Bowls
- 50 Years of International Football in Northern Ireland
- ICC World Twenty20 Qualifying Tournament
- Linfield Football Club
- World Blind Golf Championship
- Manenberg and Langa Junior Hockey Team
- ESPN Emerald Hoops Classic Basketball Tournament
- Northern Ireland Olympic and Paralympic Athletes at the 2008 Beijing Games

Sports Pitches and Facilities

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department is doing to encourage

sports clubs to cooperate with schools to share sports pitches and facilities.

(AQW 1506/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), is currently developing a new 10 year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in Northern Ireland. A draft of this Strategy, which was published for consultation in October 2007, contains proposals for encouraging sports clubs to collaborate with schools and the education sector on the sharing of sports facilities. The Budget 2008/2011 is informed by the priorities set out within this draft Strategy and provides a total of £145.3 million for sport over the next 3 years.

The Department of Education also considers that children and young people can benefit greatly from developing their physical literacy skills and participating in sporting activities. The Department's curriculum sports programme provides additional opportunities to do so for our youngest primary school children, and it welcomes opportunities for co-operation between schools and sporting bodies where this is possible.

Through the Extended Schools programme the Department of Education is seeking 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, their families and the wider community as a whole. DE is therefore keen to encourage greater community use of school premises when not otherwise required by the school, including improved access to school sports pitches and facilities.

In addition, where feasible, the Department of Education seeks to encourage school authorities to consider shared sports facilities when examining options for major capital works.

Library Buildings and Mobile Libraries

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the provision for library buildings and mobile libraries, in the Upper Bann constituency and Southern Education and Library board area.

(AQW 1595/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) has 23 branch libraries serving a population of approximately 385,000. The Board also provides mobile library services with 213 stops provided by four vehicles mainly on a fortnightly basis, with some weekly stops. Supporting these services are 2 housebound mobile libraries providing 356 stops across the SELB area calling mainly with individuals as well as old people's homes and day centres, generally on a three weekly basis.

The public library service provides a range of services including book lending, free internet access and homework clubs.

Within the Upper Bann constituency there are 5 Branch Libraries, namely: Lurgan, Portadown, Brownlow, Banbridge and Gilford. A full list of the mobile stops in the Southern Board area is attached.

HOUSEBOUND MOBILES – INDIVIDUAL CALLS IN AREAS LISTED

Week		Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
One	Ssm1	Glenanne Forkhill Meigh Bessbrook Mountnorris	Markethill Whitecross Newry Warrenpoint	Poyntzpass Loughbrickland Newry Jerrettspass	Mountnorris Bessbrook Newry Rathfriland	Mayobridge Hilltown Rathfriland Ballyward Katesbridge
	Ssm2	Off	Armagh Edenaveys	Hamiltonsbawn Craigavon Lurgan Battlehill	Armagh Milford	Ferla Mullaghbawn Crossmaglen Cullyhanna Newtownhamilton
Two	Ssm1	Portadown Lurgan	Portadown	Kilkeel Annalong	TaNDragee Lurgan Waringstown Gilford	Lurgan
	Ssm2	Donaghmore Galbally Pomeroy Newmills Coalisland Derrylaughan Tamnamore	Loup Arboe Coagh Moneymore Churchtown Lissan	Kinnego Charlemont Moy Moygashel Benburb Tullysarron	Keady Tassagh Granemore Foley Markethill	Killylea Tynan Aughnacloy Agher Clogher Fivemiletown Ballygawley Dergenagh Greystone Dyan
Three	Ssm1	Off	Banbridge	Dromore Banbridge	Lurgan	Newry Rostrevor Kilkeel
	Ssm2	Middletown Newtownhamilton Ballymacnab	Cookstown The Rock	Portadown Ahorey Richill	DuNgannon Donaghmore Castlecaulfield	Loughgall Killyman/Bush Ballynakelly Birches Salters Grange

M2 DRAFT TIMETABLE, MARCH 2007

Monday 1	
Ballyards	10.00 - 10.30
Darkley	11.00 - 11.30
(Taylor Cottages)	
Granemore	11.40 – 12.00
Lunch	

Ballymoyer	1.30 – 3.00
Lisadian-Mrs XXX	3.15 – 3.25
Whitecross	3.40 – 4.40
Mrs XXXX	4.45 – 5.00
Tuesday 1	
Out	
Ballygasson	11.00 – 11.30

Tullyroan	11.45 – 12.30
Lunch	
Blackwatertown	2.15 – 5.00
Back	
Wednesday 1	
Out	
Banbridge- HB stops:	
Pinley Green	10.45 – 11.00
(Castlewellan Rd)	
Iveagh Dr	11.10 – 11.20
Newry Rd	11.30 – 11.45
Katesbridge	12.15 – 12.45
Lunch	
Millstone Close	1.50 – 2.05
(Moneyslane)	
Ballyward	2.15 – 2.30
Leitrim	2.40 – 2.50
Gransha XXXXX	3.20 – 3.35
Back	
Thursday 1	
Out	
Tandragee	
HB, Markethill Rd	11.45 – 12.00
Clare (near PS)	12.15 – 12.45
Lunch	
Tandragee	
HB Ballylisk Lane	1.30 – 1.45
HB Mullavilly	1.50 – 2.05
Ahorey (Wallace Car Sales)	2.15 – 2.45
Ahorey Sunset Hill	3.00 – 3.30
Edenavey's Estate	4.30 – 5.00
Back	
Friday 1	
No service	

Monday 2	
No service, staff in HQ	
Tuesday 2	
Out	
Loughgall Village	12.50 – 1.30

Lunch	
Armagh HB Monaghan Rd	3.15 – 3.25
Madden	3.45 – 4.15
Milford Village	4.30 – 6.00
Back	
Wednesday 2	
Out	
Middletown	
St Louis Convent	12.30 – 12.45
Middletown Village	12.50 – 1.20
Tynan	2.15 – 3.00
Dyan	3.30 – 3.45
Caledon	4.00 – 5.00
Back	
Thursday 2	
Out	
Killylea Village	11.35 – 12.15
Lunch	
Aughnacloy	1.15 – 6.15
Back	
Friday 2	
Out	
Glenanne – Mossfield	10.45 – 11.30
Mountnorris	11.40 – 12.20
Loughgilly	12.30 – 1.00
Lunch	
Hamiltonsbawn Village	2.30 – 5.00
Back	

MOBILE 3 TIMETABLE APRIL 07

Monday 1	
Hilltown	11.00 – 12.00
Mayobridge	12.15 – 1.15
Lunch	
Clontigora	2.15 – 3.15
Clogoghue	3.30 – 5.10
Tuesday 1	
Bessbrook HB	10.45 – 11.30
Camlough 1	11.45 – 12.25
Camlough 2	12.30 – 1.00
Lunch	

Silverbridge	2.00 - 3.00
Tullyvallen	3.15 - 4.00
Altnamackin	4.15 - 4.50
Wednesday 1	
O'Rahilly Pk	10.30 – 10.55
Mullaghbawn M&T	11.00 – 12.00
Conway Pk	12.05 – 12.45
Shean	12.50 – 1.15
Lunch	
Forkhill 1	2.15 – 3.30
Forkhill 2	3.40 – 4.15
Drumintee (Mt View)	4.30 – 5.00
Thursday 1	
XXXXXXX (HB)	10.40 – 10.55
Latt	11.00 – 11.45
Jerrettspass	12.00- 12.30
Lunch	
Poyntzpass	1.30 – 3.30
Aughan Pk	3.35 – 4.15
Lurganare	4.30 – 5.15
Friday 1	
No service	

Monday 2	
Attical	11.15 – 12.00
Ballymartin	12.20 – 1.00
Lunch	
Annalong (HB)	2.00 – 2.15
Opp Surgery	2.20 – 2.40
Majors Hill	2.45 – 3.15
Longstone	3.25 – 3.55
Kilhorne	4.05 – 4.25
Linden Brae	4.30 – 4.45
Tuesday 2	
Drumilly	11.00 – 11.30
Belleeks	11.35 – 1.00
Lunch	
Newtownhamilton	2.00 – 4.45
Wednesday 2	
Jonesboro	11.00 – 1.00

Lunch	
Drumintee	2.00 – 3.00
(St Pat's Pk)	
Meigh 1	3.15 – 4.15
Meigh 2	4.30 – 5.00
Thursday 2	
Greencastle	11.30 – 12.00
Ballymaderphy	12.20 – 1.00
Lunch	
Rostrevor	2.00 – 5.00
Friday 2	
No service	

M5 TIMETABLE, 8TH MARCH 2007

Monday 1	
Out	
Laurelvale	10.30 – 10.50
Mullavilly	10.55 – 11.15
Copeland (HB)	11.30 – 11.45
Gibson's Hill	11.50 – 12.10
Robinstown	1.30 – 1.45
Cozy Corner(Birches)	1.50 – 2.15
Eglish	2.25 – 2.45
Ardress	3.05 – 3.25
Taylor Houses	3.35 – 4.00
Cranagill	4.15 – 4.30
Redman's Corner	4.35 – 5.00
Tuesday 1	
Out	
Waringstown	10.30 – 12.30
Lunch	
XXXXXXX	2.00 – 2.30
XXXXXXX	2.35 -2.40
XXXXXXX	2.45 – 3.00
XXXXXXX	3.20 – 3.35
Wednesday 1	
Out	
Bluestone	11.00 – 11.20
Tullylish	11.35 – 11.50
Laurecestown	12.00 – 12.30
Seapatrick	1.00 – 1.25

Lunch	
Woodside	2.45 – 3.00
Loughbrickland	3.05 – 3.20
Clinic, L'brickland	3.25 – 3.50
Moody Park	4.05 – 4.20
Dean's Road	4.40 – 4.55
Bleary	5.00 – 5.15
Back	
Thursday 1	
Out	
Mullabrack	10.30 – 10.45
Markethill;	
Main St	11.00 – 1.00
Lunch	
Day Centre	2.00 – 2.55
Main St	3.15 – 5.45
Back	
Friday 1	
No service	

Monday 2	
Out	
Charlestown	10.25 – 10.40
Derrytrasna	10.50 – 11.05
XXXXXX(HB)	11.20 – 11.35
XXXXXX(HB)	11.40 – 12.00
Lunch	
Beehcote	1.50 – 2.05
Quarry Gds	2.10 – 2.40
Knocknamuckley	2.50 – 3.05
Carrickblacker	3.10 – 3.25
Kensington	3.30 – 3.45
Back	
Tuesday 2	
Out	
Malcolmson Park	10.30 – 10.45
Claredon Park	10.50 – 11.05
Gilpin Park	11.15 - 11.30
XXXXXXXXXX	11.45 – 12.10
Waringstown	12.55 – 5.10
Back	

Wednesday 2	
Out	
Kilmore	10.45 – 11.00
Annahugh Park	11.15 – 11.30
Annahugh Road	11.35 – 11.45
Stewart's Tce	12.05 – 12.20
XXXXXX	12.30 – 12.50
Xxxxxx (HB)	1.00 – 1.15
Lunch	
Battlehill:	
XXXXXXXX	2.20 – 2.40
Derryhale	2.55 – 3.15
Brompton Park	3.25 – 3.45
The Oaks	3.55 – 4.15
Broomhill	4.20 – 4.50
Back	
Thursday 2	
Out	
Lurgan HB:	
Enniskeen	10.05 – 10.20
XXXXXXXX	10.30 – 10.45
XXXXXXXXXX	10.50 – 11.00
XXXXXXXXXX	11.05 – 11.20
XXXXXXXXx	11.25 – 11.40
xxxxxxxxxX	11.45 – 12.00
Donaghcloney	1.55 – 2.25
Donagh Park	2.30 – 3.00
Killysorrel	3.15 – 3.25
Blackscull	3.30 – 3.40
Spar Shop	3.45 – 4.00
Back	
Friday 2	
Out	
Wolfisland Tce	11.00 – 11.30
Colane	11.45 – 12.00
Lunch	
Loughview	1.40 – 1.55
Bayview	2.05 – 2.20
Gawley's Gate	2.30 – 2.45
Cairnhall	3.00 – 3.10

Aghagallon:	
St Patrick's Ave	3.30 – 3.45
Parknasilla	3.50 – 4.05
Post Office	4.10 – 4.30
Milltown	4.45 – 5.00

MOBILE 4 TIMETABLE**PHONE: 0777 6152568**

Monday 1	
Curglasson	1200 – 1230
Moortown (Public Stop)	1330 – 1415
Pairc na Mona(Housebound) 1425 – 1435	
Coagh	
(Urbal Road Housebound)	1505 – 1520
Coagh	
(Urbal Road Housebound)	1525 – 1540
Coagh (Public Stop)	1545 – 1645
Arrive Dungannon	1730
Tuesday 1	
Fivemiletown	
(Clabby Road Housebound) 1100 – 1115	
Fivemiletown	
(Car-park Housebound)	1120 – 1135
Fivemiletown	
(Screeby Road Housebound) 1145 - 1200	
Ballygawley	1230 - 1300
Ballygawley	1345 - 1630
Arrive Dungannon	1700
Wednesday 1	
Donaghmore	
(Ivybank Park Housebound)	1400 – 1415
Donaghmore	
(Main Street Housebound)	1420 – 1435
Annaghbeg	1445 – 1530
Cappagh	1555 – 1620
Galbally (Beechline)	1630 – 1655
Arrive Dungannon	1715
Thursday 1	
Eglis	11.00 -11.50
Benburb (1) Rookery Drive	12.10-12.30
(2) Main Street	12.35-12.30

Tullysaran	
(Community Centre)	2.00 – 2.30
Milltown (Bottom of Hill)	3.45 – 4.00
Carrickaness	4.10 – 4.30
McCartans Crossroads	4.35 – 5.00
Friday 1	
Cookstown	
(Stewart Ave. Housebound)	1130 – 1145
Cookstown	
(Morgan's Hill Rd. HB	1155 – 1210
Ardboe Lakeview HB	1250 – 1305
Ardboe Lakeview HB	1310 – 1325
Mullinahoe	1405 – 1435
Ballylifford	1505 – 1530
Ballyronan	1545 – 1615
The Loup	1630 – 1715
Moneymore (Riverview HB)	1730 – 1745
Drumullan	1800 – 1815
Arrive Dungannon	1850

Monday 2	
Stewartstown	1030 – 1300
Stewartstown	1345 – 3.00
Killen	3.15 – 3.45
Mullenakill	4.00 – 4.30
Arrive Dungannon	1705
Tuesday 2	
Augher	1115 – 1315
Augher	1400 – 1440
Clogher	1455 – 1645
Arrive Dungannon	1730
Wednesday 2	
Sandholes	1110 – 1130
Tullyhogue	1145 – 1200
Bush	1315 – 1400
Killyman	1415 – 1430
Castlecaulfield	
(Castleview HB)	1500 – 1515
Castlecaulfield Main St.	1520 – 1645
Arrive Dungannon	1705

Thursday 2	
Conway Close	1400 – 1420
Dunamore	
(Opp Mill Wheel PH)	1430 – 1500
Rock	1535 – 1610
Pomeroy (Main Street HB1)	1630 – 1645
Pomeroy (Main Street HB2)	1650 – 1705
Pomeroy (The Diamond)	1710 – 1800
Arrive Dungannon	1830
HB (Housebound)	

Note: XXXXXXXX indicates housebound individuals whose address details have been removed for data protection purposes.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to promote canoeing and rowing in preparation for the Olympics in 2012. (AQW 1610/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for promoting canoeing and rowing in preparation for the 2012 London Olympic Games rests, in the first instance, with the governing body of the sports, the Canoeing Association of Northern Ireland and the Ulster Branch, Irish Amateur Rowing Union.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, has provided financial assistance to the sports over the last three financial years as follows:

CANOEING

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Lottery	28,230	5,340	10,240
Exchequer	46,161	127,082*	40,938
Totals	74,391	132,422	51,178

ROWING

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Lottery	26,150	31,000	29,640
Exchequer	-	39,514*	-
Totals	26,150	70,514	29,640

* The Exchequer funding awarded in 2006/07 in each case relates to the three year funding period 2006-2009.

In addition to this, an application for canoeing and rowing has been made by Portadown 2000 under the

Elite Facilities Capital Programme. This is currently under consideration by SNI.

The Canoe Association of Northern Ireland has also been supported by SNI to organise and run a talent ID programme and the development of a junior canoe slalom squad.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance, financial and otherwise, his Department is giving to shooting sports in preparation for the 2012 Olympic Games. (AQW 1656/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for assisting shooting sports in preparation for the 2012 London Olympic Games rests, in the first instance, with the governing bodies of the sports, the Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association (UCPSA), the Ulster Rifle Association (URA) and the Northern Ireland Smallbore Shooting Union (NISSU).

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, has provided financial assistance to shooting sports over the last three financial years as follows:

LOTTERY FUNDING

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
UCPSA	17,600	17,500	13,000
URA	61,115	11,400	-
NISSU	42,900	-	12,000
Totals	121,615	28,900	25,000

One Exchequer award was also made to the URA in 2005/06 of £8,705.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance, financial and otherwise, his Department is giving to swimming sports in preparation for the 2012 Olympic Games. (AQW 1657/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for assisting swimming sports in preparation for the 2012 London Olympic Games rests, in the first instance, with the governing body of the sport, Swim Ulster Limited, which is affiliated to Swim Ireland.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, has provided financial assistance to swimming sports over the last three financial years as follows:

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Lottery	25,000	30,400	14,500
Exchequer	44,857	75,610	83,244
Totals	69,857	106,010	97,744

In addition to this, North Down Borough Council has been appointed as the preferred partner in the development of a 50 metre swimming pool under Phase 1 of the Elite Facilities Capital Programme. The outline business case for this has been approved and work is now proceeding on the full business case.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance, financial and otherwise, his Department is giving to cycling sports in preparation for the 2012 Olympic Games. (AQW 1658/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for assisting cycling sports in preparation for the 2012 London Olympic Games rests, in the first instance, with the governing body of the sport, Cycling Ulster, the provincial branch of Cycling Ireland.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, has provided financial assistance to cycling sports over the last three financial years as follows:

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Lottery	24,500	144,150	51,985
Exchequer	40,666	187,507	-
Totals	65,166	331,657	51,985

In addition to this, applications have been received by SNI from Belfast City Council, Down District Council and Adfinch Merchants (Newry) for the development of cycling velodromes under the Elite Facilities Capital Programme. These are currently under consideration by SNI.

Leisure Facilities

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans his Department has to promote leisure facilities along the River Lagan, particularly in

Donacloney and Magheralin, and other rural villages in the Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 1697/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is currently involved in the promotion of leisure facilities along the River Lagan evidenced through the maintenance of the Lagan Canal tow path between Moira and Aghalee, the operation of a public fishery in the lower reaches from Shaws Bridge down to Stranmillis weir and public angling access in an 11 km stretch from Spencers Bridge upstream.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland, including the distribution of funding, has supported a number of projects in the Upper Bann Constituency, details of which can be provided through SNI.

Further funding opportunities can be explored through Sport NI as well as the Department's other Arms Length Bodies.

Northern Ireland Football

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the impact of Northern Ireland football matches not being shown on terrestrial television channels on (i) public support for the Northern Ireland football team; and (ii) young people's participation in football. (AQW 1764/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Irish Football Association (IFA) is responsible for the promotion and development of football in Northern Ireland. This includes assessing the impact of Northern Ireland football matches not being shown on terrestrial television channels on (i) public support for the Northern Ireland football team; and (ii) young people's participation in football. However, the need to improve media relations generally in football, increase support for football teams and encourage participation by young people in the game have been identified as important issues facing soccer under the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) Soccer Strategy initiative. The IFA is currently implementing the recommendations of the Soccer Strategy with assistance from Sport Northern Ireland (SNI).

Sport NI

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what criteria is used by Sport NI when assessing applications for funding from sporting clubs and associations. (AQW 1770/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland operates a number of funding programmes – capital and revenue, exchequer and lottery. Whilst each individual funding programme

will have identified assessment criteria and different priorities for funding, the following general assessment criteria are considered and used to prioritise applications:

- Strategic Fit;
- Sports Development Need;
- Facility Need;
- Financial Need;
- Financing; and
- Management, Monitoring and Evaluation.

Only those applications which score highly in all areas are likely to be successful in attracting an award.

Football Pitch Improvements

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department has paid for football pitch improvements in each of the last 3 years, broken down by (i) parliamentary constituency; and (ii) council area. (AQW 1789/09)

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. SNI has advised that no Exchequer funding has been paid out for football pitch improvements in the last three financial years to 31 March 2008. However, SNI is currently operating an Exchequer programme called Places for Sport: Surfaces which focuses on providing pitches and sports surfaces. The programme has a budget for this financial year of £1.5 million and the maximum award for each project is up to £245,000 towards construction costs.

Community Relations Council

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the work undertaken by his Department in partnership with the Community Relations Council. (AQW 1790/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department through its Arm Lengths Bodies has worked in partnership with the Community Relations Council (CRC) on a number of projects.

For example, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland chairs the Shared Communities Consortium of which the CRC and a number of other statutory authorities are members. The Shared Communities Consortium oversees the Re-Imaging Communities initiative which encourages the creation of vibrant and attractive shared public space through the use of the creative arts in the public realm.

Northern Ireland Screen has also produced a number of television series in conjunction with the CRC dealing

with issues of mutual understanding. In more recent times NI Screen has worked with CRC on the issue of incoming communities.

In addition the Northern Ireland Museums Council delivered its Cultural Diversity Strategy using funding received through the CRC.

The Armagh Observatory also worked with the CRC earlier this year, as part of its involvement with the Armagh Visitor Education Committee's annual Armagh Heritage Day. This event was organised to promote the wealth of Armagh's written and archival heritage.

Finally since 1998 the Irish Football Association (IFA) has had a full time Community Relations Officer working in partnership with the CRC, with assistance from the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation to tackle the problems of sectarianism in football. This would have involved liaison with bodies such as Sport Northern Ireland, an Arms Length Body of DCAL and the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given the association between alcohol and sponsorship for sport and the arts, what action his Department is taking to encourage responsible alcohol consumption, including initiatives with which his Department has been involved. (AQW 1842/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department and associated Arms Length Bodies are committed to exploring and introducing measures which encourage responsible alcohol consumption.

For example DCAL is working closely with NIO on the development of proposals for new legislation in relation to public order at sports grounds. These include the carrying and consumption of alcohol at sports events.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland also advises groups working with young people not to accept sponsorship from alcoholic drinks companies and not to use venues where alcohol is sold.

I should add that DCAL Events Unit has provided support to events that are part sponsored by drinks companies but on such occasions sensible drinking has been promoted and participants have been referred to the 'drink aware' website.

Finally DCAL supports the facilitation by local Libraries of Health Promotion Agency Literature

Ulster-Scots Curriculum Project

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department invested in the Ulster-Scots curriculum project at Stranmillis University College; and what benefit pupils in schools have derived from it. (AQW 1910/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department did not directly fund the Ulster-Scots Curriculum Development Unit project at Stranmillis. The project work completed by the CDU at Stranmillis was funded by the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group. The total cost of the project, including Stranmillis' management fees was in the region of £1,717,442.

The completed primary and post primary school materials was piloted in twelve post primary and ten primary schools, involving approximately 800 pupils which reflected a range of school type across Northern Ireland. In addition, a couple of schools from the Irish Republic participated in the trial. The feedback from the subsequent evaluation report carried out by the CDU stated that teachers and pupils from all schools were very encouraging not only about specific materials but also regarding the project overall.

EDUCATION

Maintenance Work for 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 (Ms C Ruane): Tá socraithe agam go gcuirfear an t-eolas a iarradh i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Irish-Medium School Sector

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount allocated by her Department to (i) the Irish medium primary school sector; and (ii) the Irish medium post-primary school sector, each year for the last 10 years, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1044/09)

The Minister of Education: Allocations for the last 10 years are set out in the tables below and show recurrent and capital funding separately:

Table 1 - Recurrent Funding			Table 2 - Capital Funding		
Year	Irish Medium Primary Total £	Irish Medium Post Primary Total £	Year	Irish Medium Primary Total £	Irish Medium Post Primary Total £
1998/09	1,918,971	825,315	1998/09*	0	0
1999/00	2,232,520	824,743	1999/00	1,441,649	225,935
2000/01	2,615,263	1,017,355	2000/01	541,122	222,674
2001/02	3,144,111	1,084,431	2001/02	130,717	10,179
2002/03	3,682,134	1,203,019	2002/03	163,921	611,797
2003/04	4,767,576	1,370,160	2003/04	1,034,961	554,258
2004/05	5,141,948	1,468,527	2004/05	1,125,601	1,960,505
2005/06	5,920,654	1,913,927	2005/06	192,138	1,864,736
2006/07	6,614,759	2,135,922	2006/07	65,089	213,534
2007/08	7,875,315	2,284,229	2007/08	436,484	50,507
			* Capital Figures Not Available		

Ní choinnítear na figiúirí seo de réir thoghcheantar parlaiminte agus ní fhéadfaí iad a fháil ach ar chostas a bheadh díréireach.

These figures by parliamentary constituency are not held and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Hochtief

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education how much money has been paid by (i) Nendrum College; and (ii) Bangor Academy, to Hochtief since the commencement of their PPP/PFI contract; and for a breakdown of these costs. (AQW 1433/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go n-íocann Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College agus Nendrum College suim chinnte mhíosúil le Hochtief as na séirbhísí seo a leanas a sholáthar:

The Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College and Nendrum College pay a fixed monthly sum to Hochtief for the delivery of the following services: caretaking, grounds maintenance, security, building maintenance, mechanical and electrical maintenance, estates management services, furniture and equipment maintenance, waste management, pest control, toilet consumables, cleaning materials and some aspects of the cleaning service. Nendrum College became operational on 29 February 2008 and since then £17,600 of the school's Local Management of Schools (LMS) budget has been paid to Hochtief. Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College became operational on 30 April 2008 and since then £35,380 of the school's LMS budget has been paid to Hochtief.

I share your reservations on the use of PPP/PFI for the procurement of schools. The Department has a responsibility to consider all procurement options, taking into account guidance and experience and the need to ensure value for money. No PFI procurements have been announced in the schools estate since 2004.

Energy Efficiency of School Buildings

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education what her Department's policy is on improving the energy efficiency of school buildings. (AQW 1442/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education's aim is to promote the efficient use of energy in schools in the north of Ireland, in line with the administration's targets for energy efficiency and the reduction of emissions to the atmosphere, including the Executive's Programme for Government objective to promote energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy through the implementation of the Sustainable Development Implementation Plan 2008-2011.

Bíonn oifigeach Fuinnimh agus Comhshaoil fostaithe ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, post atá maoinithe ag an Roinn agus bíonn sé mar obair aige nó aici le héifeachtacht fuinnimh a chur chun cinn laistigh d'earnáil na scoileanna.

Each Education and Library Board employs an Energy and Environmental officer funded by the Department whose job is to promote energy efficiency within the schools sector.

Sports Pitches and Facilities

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what her Department is doing to encourage sports clubs to cooperate with schools to share sports pitches and facilities. (AQW 1507/09)

The Minister of Education: Is féidir le páistí agus daoine óga alán tairbhe a bhaint as forbairt a dhéanamh ar a gcuid scileanna fisicúla litearthachta agus as bheith páirteach in imeachtaí spóirt. Cuireann clár spóirt churaclaim na Roinne deiseanna bhreise ar fáil len é seo a dhéanamh d'ár bpáistí is óige bhunscoileanna agus cuirimid fáilte roimh deiseanna chomhoibrithe idir scoileanna agus eagraíochtaí spóirt.

Children and young people can benefit greatly from developing their physical literacy skills and participating in sporting activities. The Department's curriculum sports programme provides additional opportunities to do so for our youngest primary school children, and we welcome opportunities for co-operation between schools and sporting bodies where this is possible.

Through the Extended Schools programme we are seeking 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, their families and the wider community as a whole. We are therefore keen to encourage greater community use of school premises when not otherwise required by the school, including improved access to school sports pitches and facilities.

In addition, where feasible, the Department seeks to encourage school authorities to consider shared sports facilities when examining options for major capital works.

I understand that The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is also currently developing a new 10 year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in the North of Ireland in partnership with Sport NI (SNI). A draft of this Strategy, which was published for consultation in October 2007, contains proposals for encouraging sports clubs to collaborate with schools and the education sector on the sharing of sports facilities.

School Building Projects

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail the school building projects that are behind schedule; and how far behind schedule each project is. (AQW 1572/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuireadh moill ar na tionscadail atá ainmnithe thíos mar gheall ar chúiseanna éagsúla ina n-áirítear ceisteanna um cheannaocht suíomhanna; um athbhreithniú ar rollú fad téarmach réamh-mheasta; um phleananna athbhreithnithe de dhíth; agus um leasuithe ar bhreithmheasanna eacnamaíochta. Rinneadh measúnú ar an seasamh mar atá in aghaidh na céime ionchais a bheadh bainte amach thairis sin faoin am seo.

The projects identified below have been subject to delay for several reasons including site acquisition issues; review of projected long term enrolments; revised plans required; and revisions to economic appraisals. The position has been assessed against the stage they might otherwise have expected to have reached by now.

School	Details Of Project	Estimated Delay
St Mary's College, Derry	New school on new site	10 months
St Cecilia's College, Derry	New school on existing site	10 months
St Mary's P.S. Portglenone	New school on extended site	4 months
St Joseph's P.S. Carryduff	New school on extended site	4 months
St Patrick's G.S. Downpatrick	New school on existing site	4 months
Our Lady & St Patrick's College	New school on existing site	4 months
Lagan College	Extension & Refurbishment	6 months
Tor Bank Special School	New school on new site	6 months
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	New school on existing site	15 months
Loreto G.S. Omagh	New school on existing site	15 months
Lurgan College	New school on existing site	10 months
Portadown College	New school on existing site	10 months
Methodist College, Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment	18 months
Omagh Integrated Primary School	New school on new site	9 months
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	New school on extended site	12 months
Lisnagelvin P.S. Derry	New school on existing site	6 months
Lisbellaw P.S.	New school on existing site	6 months
Carrick P.S. Warrenpoint	New school on extended site	11 months
St Columba's P.S. Straw	New school on new site	9 months
Magherafelt H.S.	New school on existing site	6 months
Whitehouse P.S. Newtownabbey	New school on existing site	10 months
St Clare's Abbey P.S. Newry	New school on extended site	8 months
Bangor Grammar School	New school on new site	8 months
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site	12 months
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg	New school on extended site	8 months
St Teresa's P.S. Lurgan	New school on extended site	6 months
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	New school on existing site	10 months
St Conor's P.S. Omagh	New school on extended site	11 months

SEELB Commissioners

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education for an update on when she intends to replace the Commissioners at the South Eastern Education and Library Board and reinstate the Board. (AQW 1622/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn breithniú á dhéanamh ar athbhunú an Bhoird fionraithe SEELB agus fógróidh mé mo chinneadh faoi 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.

SEELB Commissioners

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail how much has been spent on allowances and expenses for the SEELB Commissioners since their appointment. (AQW 1624/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt gurbh é costas iomlán na n-íocaíochtaí, speansais san áireamh, a rinneadh do na coimisinéirí ón 6 Iúil 2006, nuair a cheapadh ar dtús iad, go dtí deireadh mí Lúnasa 2008 ná £197,373.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that the total cost of payments, including expenses, made to the commissioners from 6 July 2006, when they were first appointed, until the end of August 2008 is £197,373.

Time Spent at Departmental Headquarters

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education how many full days she has spent in her Departmental headquarters since taking up office. (AQW 1639/09)

The Minister of Education: Bainim usáid as oifig an Aire i bhFoirgnimh na Parlaiminte do fhormhór mo dhualgas Roinne agus tá 140 lá, iomláin agus páirte, caite agam ansin. Mar gheall ar sin tá 8 lá caite agam ag ceanncheathrú mo Roinne ó chuaigh mé i mbun oifige.

I use my Ministerial office in Parliament Buildings for the great majority of my Departmental duties and have spent 140 full/part days there. In consequence I have spent 8 part days at my Departmental headquarters since taking up office.

Educational Standards

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education what action she has taken in the past year to ensure that educational standards are raised so that young people have the necessary skills to progress into employment. (AQW 1702/09)

The Minister of Education: While standards are high in many schools here, there are still far too many children who are not reaching their full potential: 47% of our young people leave school without having achieved a grade C or better in GCSE Maths and English, the standard sought by employers, and go on to face a lifetime of disadvantage and difficulty in accessing employment. This is simply unacceptable.

My Department has identified as a core priority the need to raise standards and tackle underachievement in our schools and is advancing its efforts in this area under the heading Every School a Good School. Within this heading, we are taking forward two important and interlinked strategies, one concerned with school improvement in the round; the other focusing specifically on raising achievement in literacy and numeracy.

The revised school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, was launched for consultation in January of this year and the final drafting of the policy is well advanced. The policy is clear that all schools are capable of improvement and sets out how we plan to deliver improvement at every level in our education system. It also sets out the interventions

that will be taken where evidence suggests that performance could be better.

Seoladh an togra forbartha scoile athbhreithnithe, Gach Scoil Ina Scoil Mhaith, le haghaidh chomhairliúcháin i mí Eanáir na bliana seo agus tá dréachtú deireanach an togra ina thulstaid. Tá an togra rísholéir go mbíonn gach scoil ábalta feabhas a dhéanamh agus leagann sé amach an phlean atá againn le feabhsú ar gach léibhéal d'ár gcóras oideachais a shólathar. Leagtar amach fosta idirghabhálacha a dhéanfar más rud é go mbíonn fianaise ann a thugann le tuiscint go dtiocfadh le feidhmíocht na scoile bheith níos fearr.

Evidence and inspection findings tell us that 2 key elements to bringing about school improvement are good leadership and the effective use of data. In the context of leadership, my Department has made a significant investment in the development of school leadership skills, particularly through the Professional Qualification for Headship programme. In addition, we have also engaged in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study of school leadership and will be drawing up an action plan to take forward those recommendations appropriate to the education system here.

To promote and support the effective use of data to inform teaching and learning and raise standards, my Department has appointed consultants to examine the range of performance data required by schools and the support that schools might need to make better use of that data. This work will include the consideration of appropriate value added measures.

The revised literacy and numeracy strategy, which is out for consultation until 30th November, aims to ensure that every child leaves compulsory education with the appropriate standards of literacy and numeracy. The focus is on:

- Raising the levels of attainment for all young people in literacy and numeracy;
- Narrowing the gap between the highest performing and lowest performing pupils and schools; and
- Narrowing the gap between the highest performing and lowest performing pupils and schools.

My Department has also commissioned specific programmes, Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry – Bright Futures, to tackle underachievement in socially deprived areas of Belfast and Derry. These programmes are being introduced from this school year.

The revised school improvement policy and literacy and numeracy strategy complement and support other aspects of my priorities for education, including the revised curriculum, extended schools and my reforms to post-primary education.

Once these key policies are implemented their effectiveness, in terms of their impact on standards, will be monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis by the Education & Training Inspectorate; the Education and Skills Authority (once established) and by my Department.

I believe these key policies will lead to improved educational standards for all our young people and enable them to fulfil their potential.

Educational Standards

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education what analysis she has made of the effectiveness of the action she has taken in the past year to ensure that educational standards are raised so that young people have the necessary skills to progress into employment. (AQW 1704/09)

The Minister of Education: While standards are high in many schools here, there are still far too many children who are not reaching their full potential: 47% of our young people leave school without having achieved a grade C or better in GCSE Maths and English, the standard sought by employers, and go on to face a lifetime of disadvantage and difficulty in accessing employment. This is simply unacceptable.

My Department has identified as a core priority the need to raise standards and tackle underachievement in our schools and is advancing its efforts in this area under the heading Every School a Good School. Within this heading, we are taking forward two important and interlinked strategies, one concerned with school improvement in the round; the other focusing specifically on raising achievement in literacy and numeracy.

The revised school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, was launched for consultation in January of this year and the final drafting of the policy is well advanced. The policy is clear that all schools are capable of improvement and sets out how we plan to deliver improvement at every level in our education system. It also sets out the interventions that will be taken where evidence suggests that performance could be better.

Seoladh an togra forbartha scoile athbhreithnithe, Gach Scoil Ina Scoil Mhaith, le haghaidh chomhairliúcháin i mí Eanáir na bliana seo agus tá dréachtú deireanach an togra ina thulstaid. Tá an togra rísholéir go mbíonn gach scoil ábalta feabhas a dhéanamh agus leagann sé amach an phlean atá againn le feabhsú ar gach léibhéal d'ár gcóras oideachais a shólathar. Leagtar amach fosta idirghabhálacha a dhéanfar más rud é go mbíonn fianaise ann a thugann le tuiscint go dtiocfadh le feidhmíocht na scoile bheith níos fearr.

Evidence and inspection findings tell us that 2 key elements to bringing about school improvement are good leadership and the effective use of data. In the context of leadership, my Department has made a significant investment in the development of school leadership skills, particularly through the Professional Qualification for Headship programme. In addition, we have also engaged in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study of school leadership and will be drawing up an action plan to take forward those recommendations appropriate to the education system here.

To promote and support the effective use of data to inform teaching and learning and raise standards, my Department has appointed consultants to examine the range of performance data required by schools and the support that schools might need to make better use of that data. This work will include the consideration of appropriate value added measures.

The revised literacy and numeracy strategy, which is out for consultation until 30th November, aims to ensure that every child leaves compulsory education with the appropriate standards of literacy and numeracy. The focus is on:

- Raising the levels of attainment for all young people in literacy and numeracy;
- Narrowing the gap between the highest performing and lowest performing pupils and schools; and
- Narrowing the gap between the highest performing and lowest performing pupils and schools.

My Department has also commissioned specific programmes, Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry – Bright Futures, to tackle underachievement in socially deprived areas of Belfast and Derry. These programmes are being introduced from this school year.

The revised school improvement policy and literacy and numeracy strategy complement and support other aspects of my priorities for education, including the revised curriculum, extended schools and my reforms to post-primary education.

Once these key policies are implemented their effectiveness, in terms of their impact on standards, will be monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis by the Education & Training Inspectorate; the Education and Skills Authority (once established) and by my Department.

I believe these key policies will lead to improved educational standards for all our young people and enable them to fulfil their potential.

Strike at Movilla High School

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the engagements she has had to date, with the (i) South Eastern Education and Library Board; (ii) teaching union; and (iii) school, in relation to the strike at Movilla High School, Newtownards.

(AQW 1729/09)

The Minister of Education: There is no basis on which the Department can intervene in individual school discipline cases, as the implementation of school discipline policies is a matter for the Principal and the Board of Governors. The resulting dispute in this case is a sensitive matter which can only be resolved through dialogue between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the NASUWT.

Thug oifigigh agus Príomhfheidhmeannach an SEELB faisnéis dom lena chinntiú go bhfuil mé ar an eolas faoi na príomhfhorbairtí ar fad. D'iarr mé ar gach páirtí go poiblí leas a bhaint as an idirghabháil a thairg an Labour Relations Agency agus Coimisinéir na bPáistí.

I have been briefed by officials and by the Chief Executive of SEELB to ensure that I am aware of all key developments. In my statement to the Assembly on 14 October I publicly urged all those involved to work together in order to find a speedy resolution so that the education of all the pupils at Movilla High School can return to normality as quickly as possible. I understand that talks between the SEELB and the NASUWT are ongoing and I remain hopeful that a settlement can soon be reached in order that all the pupils can resume their education in a safe environment.

Newbuilds

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education for an update on the newbuilds at (i) Dean Maguire College, Carrickmore; and (ii) Omagh Integrated Primary School; and to detail when each is expected to be completed.

(AQW 1730/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá breithmheasanna eacnamaíochta ar Dean Maguire College agus Omagh Integrated Primary School á leasú faoi lathair leis na hÚdaráis ábhartha le roghanna shuíomhanna nua a chur san áireamh. Leanfaidh na scéimeanna ar aghaidh leis an údarás ábhartha chuig na céimeanna shainphleanála agus deartha chomh luath is a thugtar faomhadh do na breithmheasanna athbhreithnithe.

Economic Appraisals for Dean Maguire College and Omagh Integrated Primary School are currently being updated with the relevant authorities to take account of new site options. Once the revised appraisals have been approved the schemes will proceed with the relevant authority to the detailed

planning and design stages. Progress will be subject to the necessary planning and building processes being completed satisfactorily and the availability of resources in any particular year. It is currently anticipated that the replacement buildings would be completed in the 2011/12 financial year.

Educational Psychology Services

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the basis on which Educational Psychology Services, provided by Education and Library Boards, are prioritising the referrals presented to them by schools; and; (ii) if there is a limit of referrals per school.

(AQW 1737/09)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that all Boards, with the exception of the South – Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), use a Time Allocation model of service delivery. Using this system each school has its own waiting list of referrals to the Boards' Educational Psychology Services. It is, therefore, the schools which prioritise the pupils whom they deem to be most in need of assessment, usually through discussion with the Boards' Educational Psychology Services. This model allows schools to appraise the needs of pupils on their waiting lists on an ongoing basis.

In the SEELB referrals to the Boards Educational Psychology Services are prioritised as follows:-

- Referrals for Statutory Assessment;
- Contributions to the Annual Review process;
- Referrals for non statutory assessment.

Baineann sé le gach Bord más rud é go gcuirtear eolas os comhair an tSiceolaí Oideachais (EP) le linn chomhairliúcháin a léiríonn go bhfuil cuinsí ar leith ag an dalta, déanfar tosaíocht de na hatreoruithe sin.

In all Boards if information is presented to the Educational Psychologist (EP) during consultation that indicates that the pupil has exceptional circumstances such referrals will receive priority.

There is no set limit to the number of referrals a school can make although the number of pupils who can be assessed by an EP may be limited within a given period due to the overall capacity of the service.

Free Nursery Places

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the allocation of free nursery places in (a) Newtownabbey; (b) Carrickfergus; and (c) Larne Borough Council areas; and (ii) the number of these places that have been filled.

(AQW 1739/09)

The Minister of Education: Funded preschool provision is provided in statutory nursery schools, nursery units attached to statutory primary schools and in voluntary and private settings.

Dheimhnigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an OirThuaiscirt go bhfuil 934 áiteanna mhaoinithe i naíscóileanna ar fáil i gceantar Chomhairle Baile na Mainistreach; 468 áiteanna ar fáil i gceantar Chomhairle Carraig Fheargais; agus 279 áiteanna ar fáil i gceantar Chomhairle Latharna sa bhliain 2008/09.

The NEELB has confirmed that in 2008/09 there are 934 funded preschool places available in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area; 468 in the Carrickfergus council area; and 279 in the Larne council area.

Since the end of the 2008/09 admissions process the NEELB has responded to requests for additional places from voluntary providers to accommodate children unplaced through the admissions process. Eleven additional places have been re-allocated to Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne Borough Council areas.

The NEELB has written to the Department requesting additional resources for a shortfall of 60 preschool places in the board area. Of these, 3 are in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area, 2 in the Carrickfergus council area, and 1 in the Larne council area.

Ballywalter Primary School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education if funding has been allocated for a newbuild for Ballywalter Primary School; and what is the timescale for the newbuild to be completed. (AQW 1771/09)

The Minister of Education: Níor tugadh maoiniú le haghaidh scoil nua tógála do Ballywalter Primary School. Ní féidir mar sin amscála a thabhairt maidir le tionscadal don scoil.

Funding has not been allocated for a newbuild school for Ballywalter Primary School. It is not possible therefore to provide a timescale for a project for the school.

Anti-Bullying Policies of Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to report on what progress is being made to ensure that within the anti-bullying policies of schools, there are specific clauses dealing with homophobic bullying. (AQW 1776/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tromaíocht hómafóbach inár seomraí ranga agus inár sochaí doghlactha.

Homophobic bullying is unacceptable in our classrooms and in our society.

All schools are required by law to have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils and it is a matter for them to determine, in consultation with pupils and parents, the detail of their policy.

The Department's publication 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour' offers detailed guidance, practical initiatives and case studies to support schools to tackle bullying. The guidance specifically states that racist, homophobic, sectarian or other offensive name-calling is a form of bullying.

The Department continues to work in close partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations to address bullying in all its forms. It is for this reason that it plays an active role in and funds the local Anti-Bullying Forum which has established a number of working groups, one of which is specifically considering the issue of homophobic bullying.

The Department is fully committed to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child especially Article 19, which concerns the child's right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, in body or mind.

The Department has been working, and will continue to work, with both the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission to ensure that equality and human rights are reflected throughout schools.

The Department has noted Section 5.3 of the Equality Commission's guidance (A Guide on the Provision of Goods, Facilities, Services and Premises) on the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2006 which recommends, "Schools will need to ensure that homophobic bullying is taken seriously and dealt with as firmly as bullying on any other grounds".

Pupil to Teacher Ratio

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the pupil to teacher ratio in Scotland. (AQW 1778/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá cóimheasa Dalta:Múinteoir (PTR anna) mar a leanas:

The Pupil:Teacher Ratios (PTRs) are as follows:

Region	Overall PTR
England ¹	16.9
Scotland	13.3
Wales	17.9

1 - The overall PTR for England excludes special schools

Pupil to Teacher Ratio

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the pupil to teacher ratio in Wales.

(AQW 1780/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá cóimheasa Dalta:Múinteoir (PTR anna) mar a leanas:

The Pupil:Teacher Ratios (PTRs) are as follows:

Region	Overall PTR
England 1	16.9
Scotland	13.3
Wales	17.9

1 - The overall PTR for England excludes special schools

Pupil to Teacher Ratio

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the pupil to teacher ratio in England.

(AQW 1781/09)

The Minister of Education: The Pupil:Teacher Ratios (PTRs) are as follows:

Region	Overall PTR
England 1	16.9
Scotland	13.3
Wales	17.9

1 - The overall PTR for England excludes special schools

Translating Speeches and Statements

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost to her Department of translating her speeches and statements from English into Irish.

(AQW 1782/09)

The Minister of Education: Is mar chuid intreacht é aistriúchán na n-óráidí agus na ráiteas ó Bhéarla go Gaeilge den na freagrachtaí a bhíonn ag an bheirt ofigeach Gaeilge sa Roinn Oideachais. Mar gheall ar sin, ní dhéantar aon áireamh ar leith ar chostais a thabhaítear ar na saindualgaí seo

The translation of speeches and statements from English into Irish forms an intrinsic part of the responsibilities of the Department of Education's two Irish Language Staff Officers. Consequently, the costs incurred in these specific duties are not separately calculated.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the criticisms contained in the recent United Nations report on the United Kingdom's compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in relation to the segregation of education in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1786/09)

The Minister of Education: In the Concluding Observations of the Forty-ninth session of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child it was recommended that measures be taken to address segregation of education.

Much work has been taken forward to improve planning of new schools, including integrated schools. My Department has published a Sustainable Schools Policy, which explicitly considers Integrated Education. The published Sustainable Schools document has at the heart of its policy context a recognition that "new opportunities for collaboration and sharing in education should be pursued".

The stated aim is about integrating education in much wider way than just focusing on religion. The published Sustainable Schools document notes the recommendation in the Bain Report that ESA should be required to maximise opportunities for integrating education within a system of sustainable schools. The document states, "The Department will therefore examine school proposals in future for opportunities for delivering a more inclusive approach."

Tugann an beartas dá aire an dualgas reachtúil atá ar mo Roinn le Oideachas imeasctha a spreagadh agus a éascú. Glacaim leis an dualgas seo le lán dáiríreacht. Áfach, caithfidh mé bheith cinnte agus tograi do scoileanna imeasctha nua á mbreathnú agam go mbeidh said láidir, nach dtabhóidh said aon chaiteachas poiblí atá míréasúnta agus go mbeidh said oiriúnach de réir na gcritéar a shonraítear.

The Policy notes my Department's statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Integrated education. I take this duty very seriously. However, in considering proposals for new integrated schools I must ensure that these are robust, do not involve unreasonable public expenditure and meet the specified criteria. This notwithstanding, it should be noted also that my Department operates a unique, twin-track approach to enable the development of the integrated sector. In addition to the new schools available to all sectors, the Integrated sector can grow through transformation of existing, viable schools.

The application of and commitment to the duty by my Department has seen the number of integrated schools increase from 33 in 1997 to 58 in 2007, and the number of pupils attending integrated schools has more than doubled to over 18,000 in the same period.

In addition to the published Sustainable Schools Policy, my Department is currently consulting on Area-Based Planning of the Schools' Estate. This policy will both determine and address the need for provision in an area. Area Plans will need to include an examination of opportunities for sharing and collaboration to deliver education. The Area Based Planning consultation document states "ESA (will have) responsibility for facilitating and encouraging cross-sector collaboration".

I recognise that change is required in how we plan, finance and deliver education to best meet the needs of all children in the 21st century, and that I am determined to tackle the issues with appropriate measures and policies.

Children with Dyslexia

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education how many schools have obtained 'dyslexia friendly' status to meet the needs of children with dyslexia, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1788/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil de réir thoghcheantar parlaiminte; tá an freagra á chur ar fáil mar sin de, de réir limistéar an Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELB).

The information requested is not available by parliamentary constituency; the response provided is therefore by Education and Library Board (ELB) area.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the ELBs that the vast majority of schools have had staff awareness training in developing a "dyslexia friendly" learning environment. In addition a number of schools have either obtained or are working towards the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) kitemark for "dyslexia friendly" status as follows:-

Belfast Education and Library Board	none
North-Eastern Education and Library Board	7
South-Eastern Education and Library Board	2
Southern Education and Library Board	1
Western Education and Library Board	7

Children with Dyslexia

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education how many mainstream schools have appointed a dedicated teacher for children with dyslexia, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1791/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní choinníonn an Roinn Oideachais ná na Boird Oideachais agus

Leabharlainne (ELB's) an teolas a iarradh. Tá tugtha mar chomhairle dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí na ELB's go mbíonn séirbhísí ionadbhunaithe acu a thugann tacaíocht do pháistí a bhfuil deachrachtaí litearthachta ar leith acu agus a mbíonn ag freastal ar ghnáthscoil.

The information requested is not held by either the Department of Education or the Education and Library Boards (ELBs). I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the ELBs that Boards have centre-based services that support children with specific literacy difficulties who are in a mainstream school. In addition selected schools have obtained dyslexia friendly status to support a whole school approach to meeting the needs of the child. Some mainstream schools may appoint a dedicated teacher for children with dyslexia, although this is at the discretion of the school.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the work carried out by CCEA since 15 May 2008, on behalf of the Department, to prepare a test paper in line with her proposals for post primary transfer. (AQW 1796/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá dréachtú déanta ar mhionshonraíocht agus ar chlár oibre a mbaineann le forbairt ar shás measúnú, déanfar forbairt ansin ar ábhar an scrúdaithe.

A detailed specification and programme of work in relation to the development of an assessment mechanism has been drawn up, to proceed then to the development of the test content. This will be extensively trialled and will be subject to a rigorous development process.

Transfer Process

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1631/09, to detail, in the absence of an agreed way forward, how the Department defines 'have regard'; and whether after schools give regard to any guidelines issued by the Department, they are legally permitted to put in place their own transfer process, including an academic selective element. (AQW 1797/09)

The Minister of Education: Measaim go mbeadh treoirilnte na Roinne ina cáipéis thábhachtach do na scoileanna sa chomhthéacs seo nuair atá breathnú á dhéanamh acu ar fhorbairt na gcritéar iontrála agus an ról atá acu lastigh den phróiseas iontrála a chomhlíonadh.

I consider that Departmental guidance in this context would be an important document for schools

to consider in developing their admissions criteria and performing their role within the admissions process. Disregard for this guidance through the operation of an independently administered transfer process may be lawful, but may carry with it risks and uncertainties.

Schools Transfer Process

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1631/09, to detail, in the absence of an agreement, what legislative authority will apply to guidelines issued by her Department to those schools implementing their own transfer process. (AQW 1798/09)

The Minister of Education: Maidir le treoir ar iontrálacha a eiseofaí chuig gach scoil muna mbeadh comhaontú ann ar an bhealach chun tosaigh, d'eiseofaí an treoir sin de réir Airteagal 16B den Education Order (NI) 1997, arna leasú le hAirteagal 30 den Education Order (NI) 2006. Chun an reachtaíocht a lua ina hiomlán:

Admissions guidance issued to all schools in the absence of an agreed way forward would be issued according to Article 16B of the Education Order (NI) 1997, as amended by Article 30 of the Education Order (NI) 2006. To quote the legislation in full:

“Guidance as to admissions

16B.(1) The Department may issue, and from time to time revise, such guidance as it thinks appropriate in respect of the arrangements for the admission of pupils to grant-aided schools and the discharge by—

- (a) boards;
- (b) the Boards of Governors of grant-aided schools;
- (c) appeal tribunals constituted in accordance with regulations under Article 15(8); and
- (d) the body established by regulations under Article 16A(6),

of their respective functions under this Part.

- (2) The guidance may in particular set out aims, objectives and other matters in relation to the discharge of those functions.
- (3) It shall be the duty of—
 - (a) each of the bodies mentioned in paragraph (1); and
 - (b) any other person exercising any function for the purposes of the discharge by such a body of functions under this Part,

to have regard to any relevant guidance for the time being in force under this Article.”

Harassment and Bullying of Teachers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what processes are in place to help teachers and school staff who have been victims of harassment and bullying in each (i) Education and Library Board; and (ii) sector.

(AQW 1799/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus ag Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil go mbíonn rochtain ag gach ball foirne, idir foireann a mhúineann agus fhoireann nach múineann, d'a gcuid Polasaithe faoi Bhualáíocht agus faoi Chiapadh agus go ndéarnadh comhaontú ar na polasaithe seo leis na Ceardchumannn. Soláthraíonn na polasaithe faoi seach seo módh le gearáin a dhéanamh, a imscrudú agus a réiteach. Bíonn idirghabháil ar fáil mar chuid na hoibríochta den pholasaí nó mar mhalairt air.

The education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have indicated that all staff, both teaching and non-teaching, have access to their respective Bullying and Harassment Policies which have been agreed with the trade unions. The respective policies provide a procedure to report, investigate and resolve complaints. Mediation is available either within the operation of the policy or as an alternative to it.

All staff both teaching and non-teaching also have access to a welfare service and a confidential counselling service at any time. The availability of the counselling service is emphasised to staff when a complaint of bullying or harassment is received. However, the service is self-referring and completely confidential so the decision whether or not to avail of counselling is up to the member of staff.

Harassment and Bullying of Teachers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education the number of incidents of harassment and bullying of teachers and school staff in total; and broken down by (i) Education and Library Board; and (ii) sector, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1800/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an teolas seo a leanas curtha ar fáil ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus ag Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil maidir le teagmhais faoi bhualáíocht agus faoi chiapadh a rinneadh ar mhúinteoirí agus ar fhoireann scoile ag foireann eile.

The education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have provided the following information in respect of incidents of bullying and harassment of teachers and school staff by other staff.

	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Controlled	Maintained	Controlled	Maintained	Controlled	Maintained
BELB	1	0	1	2	0	0
NEELB	3	2	2	1	3	0
SEELB*	0	3	0	0	0	0
SELB	3	0	1	1	0	0
WELB	0	2	0	1	0	1
Total	7	7	4	5	3	1

* The SEELB does not hold this information

The Department publishes information on the number of pupil suspensions for verbal abuse and physical assault on teachers. The information is as follows:

	2005/06			2006/07		
	Controlled	Catholic Maintained	Other	Controlled	Catholic Maintained	Other
BELB	188	197	49	190	259	47
NEELB	408	99	54	391	125	67
SEELB	304	107	95	140	58	26
SELB	174	237	83	130	199	32
WELB	81	223	137	103	291	70
Total	1155	863	418	954	932	242

The numbers of expulsions are relatively small and are not disaggregated between education and library boards because of the risk that a school/pupil may be identifiable. In 2005/06 and 2006/07 there were 8 and 14 instances respectively of expulsion relating to physical assaults on teaching staff. The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2007/08 school year are currently being analysed by the Department and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Newly Graduated Teachers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in relation to introducing an induction year for newly graduated teachers.
(AQW 1805/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá seasamh an scéil fós mar a bhí leagtha amach sa litir a chuir mé chugat ar 11 Feabhra 2008.

The position remains as set out in my letter to you of 11 February 2008.

The costs associated with the introduction of a guaranteed induction year for newly qualified teachers here are substantial. It is estimated that a guarantee to students graduating after 2008 would cost over £12 million in the first year and over £20 million in subsequent years. The Department does not currently have the available resources to take this forward.

In light of the current funding restraints, falling enrolments and reduced intakes, it is unlikely that the guaranteed induction arrangements in Scotland could be introduced here.

Schools in Island Magee

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to provide (i) a progress report on the plans to amalgamate schools in Islandmagee on a new site; and (ii) the dates when (a) the three schools agreed to amalgamation; (b) planning permission for the site was granted; (c) the site was purchased and its cost; (d) recommendations for the area groups and Department will be made public; and (e) she will announce her decision on the funding and building of the new school.
(AQW 1812/09)

The Minister of Education: The amalgamation involves Kilcoan Primary School and Mullaghduh Primary School. The Department was first advised of the potential rationalisation in March 2002 and there were originally three schools involved. The third school, Ballypriormore Primary School however closed at in December 2003. A development proposal for the amalgamation of Kilcoan and Mullaghduh Primary Schools was published in December 2003 and approved in April 2004.

A revised economic appraisal for the amalgamation was approved by the Department on 17 October 2006. The recommended option is for a new amalgamated school on a new site. No decision has been taken on the timing of the next capital funding announcement and I cannot at this stage give a commitment on timing of a decision on the funding for a newbuild for the school.

Outline planning approval was granted on 4 July 2005. The main site was purchased on 30 April 2007 at a cost of £900,000 and land to provide sight lines was purchased on 5 September 2008 at a cost of £5,000.

Cuireadh an cleachtadh pleanála reatha bunaithe sa cheantair ar bun le breithniú a dhéanamh, ar bhonn réigiúnach, ar na socraithe is éifeachtaí agus is éifeachtúla leis an Chreatlach Tedilíochta a sholathár do dhaoine óga ón bhliain 2013 ar aghaidh tríd oideachas iarbhunscolaíochta. D'iarr mé ar an Ghrúpa Lárnach, agus an cleachtadh seo á chur chun cinn acu, le plean réigiúnach a dhréachtú roimh dheireadh mí na Feabhra 2009.

The current area based planning exercise has been established to consider, on a regional basis, the most efficient and effective arrangements for the post-primary phase of education to deliver the Entitlement Framework to young people, from 2013 onwards. I have asked the Central Group, which is taking this exercise forward, to draw up a draft regional plan by the end of February 2009.

Woodburn Primary School

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to provide (i) a progress report on the plans to build a new Woodburn Primary School; and (ii) the dates when (a) planning permission for the site was granted; (b) the site was purchased and its cost; (c) recommendations for the area groups and Department will be made public; and (d) she will announce her decision on the funding and building of the new school. (AQW 1813/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department approved the economic appraisal for Woodburn primary School in January 2008. The recommended option is for a new replacement school on the extended existing site. Outline Planning Approval was granted on 20 January 2004. Additional land required for the development of a new school was purchased on 3 March 2006 at a cost of £250,000.

No decision has been taken on the timing of the next capital announcement and I cannot at this stage give a commitment on timing of a decision on the funding of a newbuild for the school.

Cuireadh an cleachtadh pleanála reatha bunaithe sa cheantair ar bun le breithniú a dhéanamh, ar bhonn réigiúnach, ar na socraithe is éifeachtaí agus is éifeachtúla leis an Chreatlach Tedilíochta a sholathár do dhaoine óga ón bhliain 2013 ar aghaidh tríd oideachas iarbhunscolaíochta. D'iarr mé ar an Ghrúpa Lárnach, agus an cleachtadh seo á chur chun cinn acu, le plean réigiúnach a dhréachtú roimh dheireadh mí na Feabhra 2009.

The current area based planning exercise has been established to consider, on a regional basis, the most efficient and effective arrangements for the post-primary phase of education to deliver the Entitlement Framework to young people, from 2013 onwards. I have asked the Central Group, which is taking this exercise forward, to draw up a draft regional plan by the end of February 2009.

Bookstart Programme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the future of the Bookstart Programme. (AQW 1823/09)

The Minister of Education: Creidim go bhfuil sé iontach tábhachtach go bhféachfaimid le suim sa léitheoireacht a chothú i measc daoine óga agus le tacaíocht a thabhairt do thuismitheoirí a oiread agus is féidir. Tá cuid mhór acmhainní leithdháilte ag an Roinn chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don Bookstart Programme le blianta beaga anuas, agus is léir go bhfuil cuid mhór le tairiscint aige ina leith seo.

I believe it is very important that we seek to cultivate an interest in reading in young children and support parents as much as possible. The Bookstart Programme, to which the Department has allocated considerable resources in its support over recent years, clearly has much to offer in this regard.

As you may be aware my Department has recently issued a revised literacy and numeracy strategy for consultation and the results of the consultation process will be available early next year.

I can confirm that my Department has provided £200k for the Bookstart Programme through the 2008/09 regional literacy action plan. This plan is based on the direction of travel outlined in the revised literacy and numeracy strategy and will cover the transition year prior to the establishment of ESA.

While I appreciate your concerns about long term future funding, I am sure however you will understand that until the outcomes of the consultation have been considered and the way forward agreed I am currently unable to make any further determinations about the long term future funding arrangements for the Bookstart programme.

Temporary Teachers

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost to each Education and Library Board of employing temporary teachers through recruitment agencies, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1824/09)

The Minister of Education: Taispeántar sa tábla thíos, an costas a thabhaítear ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne trí fhostaíocht mhúinteoirí sealadacha ó ghníomhaíochtaí earcaíochta i ngach bliain le trí bliana anuas.

The cost to each Education and Library Board of employing temporary teachers through recruitment agencies, in each of the last 3 years is as outlined in the table below:

Employer/ Year	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
BELB	£203,197.00	£109,863.00	£35,827.00
WELB	0	0	0
SELB	£20,886.00	£13,626.00	£1,825.00
NEELB	£114,725.00	£76,822.00	£63,694.00
SEELB	£258,083.00	£134,007.00	£67,914.00

Temporary Teachers

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education how schools arrange their temporary teacher list to cover daily supply work. (AQW 1826/09)

The Minister of Education: Ó thús na scoilbhliana seo, éilítear ar gach scoil úsáid a bhaint as Clár na Múinteoirí Ionaid chun gach múinteoir ionaid cáilithe a íoctar ar phárolla na Roinne a chur in áirithe. Is féidir teacht ar chóip den imlitir ábhartha ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne ag <http://www.deni.gov.uk/dc2008-10.pdf>.

From the start of this school year, all schools are required to use the Substitute Teachers Register for booking all qualified substitute teachers paid through the Departmental payroll. A copy of the relevant circular can be found on the Department's website at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/dc2008-10.pdf>.

The Department has also advised teachers' employers that retired teachers should only be re-employed to provide short-term cover where newly qualified teachers or experienced non-retired teachers are unavailable.

School Attendance

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to address the issue of children with less than 85% attendance in School. (AQW 1870/09)

The Minister of Education: Ó mhí Mheán Fómhair 2006, bíonn córas nua caighdeánaithe in úsáid ag scoileanna le neamhláithreachta a chlarú, i ndiaidh nuashonruithe a rinneadh ar an mhodúil tinrimh den chóras Classroom 2000 (C2K). Cuireann é seo ar chumas na scoileanna clárú a dhéanamh ar neamhláithreachta na ndaltaí, ar fáthanna don neamhláithreachta agus más neamhláithreachta údaráithe nó neamhúdaráithe í.

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. This new data is being collected in the current School Census exercise which began in October and 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.

The Education Welfare Service (EWS) receives referrals from schools when pupils' attendance is a cause for concern or when attendance drops below 85%.

The initial response to a referral of a pupil by a school to EWS is a home visit. This provides the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) with an opportunity to assess whether the absence is condoned by parents and if they are in a position to ensure regular attendance. When this is the case court action may be considered.

Where parents are judged to be in need of support or addressing the underlying reasons for non-attendance will require sustained intervention, then the EWO will act as lead worker and in collaboration with all parties seek to agree an action plan. This may involve a 'case conference' at which the pupil, his parents and the school are represented. Depending on the nature of the presenting problems participation may be broadened to include other agencies. For pupils with particular problems regular attendance at their host school, or any other mainstream school, may not be an option. Where this is the case, pupils may be referred by their EWO to a suitable alternative education programme.

Preschool Children

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of preschool children who have accessed a funded place in nursery school or in a playgroup, broken down by District Council area. (AQW 1871/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní féidir leis na cúig Bhórd Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an teolas seo a sholáthar i bhformáid chomhsheasmhach.

This information cannot be provided in a consistent format by the five Education and Library Boards.

What I can confirm, in respect of the 2008/09 school year, is that Education and Library Boards have notified a net return of 20 funded places, which have not been taken up in the voluntary/private sector, under funding provided via the Preschool Education Expansion Programme. Final figures will only be available at the conclusion of the 2008 School Census exercise.

In the 2007/08 school year, there were 21,118 children in funded preschool education. The school projection model used at the time predicted 22,264 P1 pupils in September 2008. This would indicate that the

preschool phase overall level of provision was running at 94%.

As not every parent wants to avail of a preschool place for their children, and as the preschool phase of education is not compulsory, this level of provision is considered sufficient to meet demand.

Preschool Children

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of preschool children who have not been able to access a funded place in nursery school or in a playgroup, broken down by District Council area. (AQW 1872/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní féidir leis na cúig Bhórd Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an teolas seo a sholáthar i bhformáid chomhsheasmhach.

This information cannot be provided in a consistent format by the five Education and Library Boards.

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As not every parent wants to avail of a preschool place for their children, and as the preschool phase of education is not compulsory, this level of provision is considered sufficient to meet demand.

GCSE Grades

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of pupils who achieve five or more GCSE grades A*-C, broken down by (i) both council area and; (ii) ward area. (AQW 1873/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh curtha i leabharlann an Tionóil.

The information requested has been placed in the Assembly library.

School Attendance

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the rate per thousand of 5-17 year old pupils that have less than 85% school attendance, broken down by (i) council area; and (ii) electoral ward. (AQW 1874/09)

The Minister of Education: Faoi mar atá an scéal faoi láthair, ní choinníonn an Roinn an teolas a iarradh.

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 was required to facilitate the transfer of detailed, yet anonymised, attendance data to the Department for analysis. This software is now in place and data for the 2006/07 and 2007/08 school years is being collected as part of the current census exercise.

Early Retirement Policies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the Department's policy on early retirement; and (ii) the retirement options for (a) teachers; and (b) school staff. (AQW 1886/09)

The Minister of Education:

- (a) The Department manages and administers the Teachers' Pension Scheme (NITPS) on behalf of teachers' employers. The Scheme includes arrangements that allow teachers who retire prematurely to have their pension paid early without actuarial reduction and, at the employers' discretion, to be awarded further compensation in the form of an additional service credit ("added years"). These arrangements are intended to provide a management tool that employing authorities can use to bring about a qualitative improvement in the educational provision in their schools.

Bionn eolas faoi na roghanna scoir ar fáil faoin Scéim foilsithe ar shuíomh greasáin na Roinne:

Information about the retirement options available under the Scheme is published on the Department's website:

http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/teachers-pg/64_teachers-pensionscheme_pg/leaflets/retirement_arrangements_and_planning.htm

- (b) The early retirement of school staff other than teachers is a matter for their employing authorities. The normal retirement age for non-teaching staff is 65 although, like teachers, staff have the right to request to work beyond normal retirement age with the consent of their employer. They may also request flexible retirement after the age of 50 (55 with effect from 2010). The Education and Library Boards operate a Scheme for Redundancy In Accordance With The Local Government (Early Termination of Employment) (Discretionary Compensation) Regulations (NI) 2006; and a Scheme for the Premature Retirement Of Board Officers (Aged 50 and Over) in the Interest of The Efficient Discharge of the Employer's Function.

Disciplinary Proceedings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) potential disciplinary offences for (a) teachers; and (b) school staff, and (ii) the disciplinary processes that are in place for (c) primary; and (d) post primary schools. (AQW 1887/09)

The Minister of Education: (i) (a) agus (b) Ní féidir bheith saintreorach maidir le cad is cion araíonachta ann. Is féidir le réimse na gcionta a bheith leathan. Ó mhí-iompar beag mar shampla gan neamhláithreachta a chur in iúl, go dtí mí-iompar tromchúiseach féideartha a bheadh dífhostú mar thoradh air, mar shampla i gcásanna a bhaineann le ceisteanna um chosaint leanai. Tá liosta de na mí-iompair féideartha curtha san áireamh in imlitir TNC 2008/4 agus is féidir teacht uirthi ar shuíomh greasáin na Roinne –

(www.deni.gov.uk/index/teachers-pg/81_teachers-payandconditions_pg.htm).

(i) (a) and (b) It is not possible to be prescriptive in terms of what constitutes a disciplinary offence. Offences can range from minor misconduct such as failing to report absence through to potential gross misconduct that may result in dismissal such as cases involving child protection issues. Whilst not exhaustive a list of potential disciplinary offences is included in the TNC 2008/4 Circular which can be found on the Department's website - (www.deni.gov.uk/index/teachers-pg/81_teachers-payandconditions_pg.htm).

(ii) (c) and (d) Both teachers and support staff have disciplinary procedures in place which have been agreed through the relevant negotiating machinery and include features that satisfy rules of natural justice and legislative requirements. These procedures can be found on the employing authorities' websites. The procedures apply equally to primary and post-primary sectors.

School Counselling Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the counselling services in place for (i) teachers and school staff; and (ii) pupils in (a) primary schools; and (b) post primary schools. (AQW 1888/09)

The Minister of Education:

- (i) Cuireann gach údarás fostóra réimse sheirbhísí comhairleoireachta ar fáil do mhúinteoirí agus d'fhoireann scoile i mbunscoileanna agus in iarbunscoileanna araon.

Each employing authority provides a range of counselling services available to teachers and school staff in both primary and post primary schools. These include -

- the availability of welfare officers,
- 24 hour telephone helplines,
- independent sessions with trained counsellors, and
- referral to occupational health specialists.

The identity of those availing of the services remains confidential and is not disclosed to the employing authority. The employing authorities have recently agreed to extend existing access to confidential counselling services to all teachers via a 24 hour telephone helpline, and to consider the scope for further centralising the provision of teacher welfare services.

- (ii) Counselling support is available to all post primary schools which wish it and this support on the basis of half day per week (three full counselling sessions) is available in 98% of these schools. Additional resources have now been made available to extend a Programme to Promote Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing into the primary and special education sectors. This expansion will focus on developing pupils' resilience and coping capacities and include access to appropriate therapeutic interventions – this may include counselling support. On the basis of available funding, the expansion will have to be phased over three years and it may be 2010/11 before a counselling service is accessible to pupils across the primary and special sectors.

Disciplinary Proceedings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of disciplinary proceedings initiated in relation to incidents of (i) harassment; and (ii) bullying, of teachers and school staff broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) sector, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1889/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an teolas seo a leanas curtha ar fáil ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus ag Comhairle na Scoileanna

Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil faoi lion iomlán na n-imeachtaí araíonachta a bhí tosaithe maidir le (i) ciapadh; agus le (ii) bulaíocht, a rinneadh ar mhúinteoirí agus ar fhoirne scoile.

The education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have provided the following information in respect of the total number of disciplinary proceedings initiated in relation to incidents of (i) harassment; and (ii) bullying, of teachers and school staff.

	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Controlled	Maintained	Controlled	Maintained	Controlled	Maintained
BELB	1	0	1	0	0	0
NEELB	0	0	2	0	0	0
SEELB*	0	1	0	0	0	0
SELB	1	0	0	0	0	0
WELB	0	1	0	1	0	0
Total	2	2	3	1	0	0

* The SEELB does not hold this information

The Department publishes information on the number of pupil suspensions for verbal abuse and physical assault on teachers. The information is as follows:

	2005/06			2006/07		
	Controlled	RC Maintained	Other	Controlled	RC Maintained	Other
BELB	188	197	49	190	259	47
NEELB	408	99	54	391	125	67
SEELB	304	107	95	140	58	26
SELB	174	237	83	130	199	32
WELB	81	223	137	103	291	70
Total	1155	863	418	954	932	242

The numbers of expulsions are relatively small and are not disaggregated between education and library boards because of the risk that a school/pupil may be identifiable. In 2005/06 and 2006/07 there were 8 and 14 instances respectively of expulsion relating to physical assaults on teaching staff. The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2007/08 school year are currently being analysed by the Department and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Public Transport

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who used public transport to attend (i) primary schools; and (ii) post primary schools, during the academic year 2007-8, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) sector. (AQW 1891/09)

The Minister of Education: Ni choinníonn an Roinn Oideachais eolas a bhaineann le módhanna taistil a bhíonn in úsáid ag na daltaí sin nach mbíonn i dteideal chuidiú iompair ó bhaile go scoil.

The Department of Education does not hold information relating to the travel methods employed by those pupils not eligible to receive home to school transport assistance. As such, the tables below detail the information you have requested but only pertain to those pupils in receipt of home to school transport assistance and travelling on Translink services under the normal sessional ticket arrangement:

BELFAST BOARD

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Controlled and Maintained Primary*	0	2	0
Controlled and Maintained Post-Primary*	21	68	1
Voluntary Grammar	36	269	2
Integrated:			
Primary	0	140	0
Post-Primary	349	533	3
Special:			
Primary Schools	0	6	0
Post-Primary Schools	1	31	0
Special Schools	0	0	0
Irish-Medium:			
Primary	0	3	0
Post-Primary	0	62	0
Alternative Education Provision	0	1	1
Total	407	1,115	7

NORTH-EASTERN BOARD

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Controlled and Maintained Primary*	708	0	1
Controlled and Maintained Post-Primary*	7,370	245	73
Voluntary Grammar	5,499	1,003	202

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Integrated:			
Primary	29	41	0
Post-Primary	997	103	162
Special:			
Primary Schools	0	0	0
Post-Primary Schools	0	0	0
Special Schools	4	0	2
Irish-Medium:			
Primary	2	3	0
Post-Primary	9	4	0
Alternative Education Provision	3	0	0
Total	14,621	1,399	440

SOUTH-EASTERN BOARD

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Controlled and Maintained Primary*	202	2	0
Controlled and Maintained Post-Primary*	3,038	34	8
Voluntary Grammar	7,809	275	218
Integrated:			
Primary	27	21	0
Post-Primary	1,215	24	8
Special:			
Primary Schools	4	4	0
Post-Primary Schools	304	3	3
Special Schools	1	0	0
Irish-Medium:			
Primary	2	0	0
Post-Primary	34	68	0
Alternative Education Provision	29	2	1
Total	12,665	433	238

SOUTHERN BOARD

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Controlled and Maintained Primary*	95	0	0
Controlled and Maintained Post-Primary*	3,896	0	1
Voluntary Grammar	6,467	0	31
Integrated:			

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Primary	55	0	0
Post-Primary	710	0	3
Special:			
Primary Schools	5	0	0
Post-Primary Schools	167	0	0
Special Schools	0	0	0
Irish-Medium:			
Primary	0	0	0
Post-Primary	2	0	0
Alternative Education Provision	14	0	1
Total	11,411	0	36

WESTERN BOARD

	Bus	Metro	Railways
Controlled and Maintained Primary*	284	0	0
Controlled and Maintained Post-Primary*	2,367	0	0
Voluntary Grammar	4,978	0	0
Integrated:			
Primary	4	0	0
Post-Primary	476	0	0
Special:			
Primary Schools	6	0	0
Post-Primary Schools	130	0	0
Special Schools	0	0	0
Irish-Medium:			
Primary	2	0	0
Post-Primary	2	0	0
Alternative Education Provision	6	0	0
Total	8,255	0	0

* Home to school transport expenditure details are not currently held separately for controlled and maintained schools.

Religious Breakdown

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide a religious breakdown of those attending (i) integrated primary schools; and (ii) post primary school, in each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1894/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an freagra sna táblaí seo thíos.

The answer is contained in the tables below.

RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN OF PUPILS ATTENDING INTEGRATED PRIMARY AND POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2003/04 – 2007/08

2003/04

Religion	School Type	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Protestant	Primary	327	286	734	793	421	2,561
	Post primary	620	546	995	2,132	502	4,795
Catholic	Primary	393	455	502	656	554	2,560
	Post primary	723	1,100	552	918	711	4,004
Other	Primary	145	177	356	414	204	1,296
	Post primary	167	105	282	569	155	1,278

2004/05

Religion	School Type	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Protestant	Primary	322	313	724	1,011	425	2,795
	Post primary	612	520	943	2,154	502	4,731
Catholic	Primary	364	497	552	701	557	2,671
	Post primary	707	1,073	687	921	778	4,166
Other	Primary	161	168	337	437	229	1,332
	Post primary	215	128	283	595	181	1,402

2005/06

Religion	School Type	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Protestant	Primary	314	326	718	1,033	423	2,814
	Post primary	622	513	976	2,189	515	4,815
Catholic	Primary	359	527	577	714	585	2,762
	Post primary	718	1,030	760	949	795	4,252
Other	Primary	174	194	358	485	258	1,469
	Post primary	239	158	273	583	193	1,446

2006/07

Religion	School Type	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Protestant	Primary	272	358	733	1,050	427	2,840
	Post primary	636	497	1,016	2,094	492	4,735

Religion	School Type	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Catholic	Primary	321	538	587	731	579	2,756
	Post primary	711	1,074	781	960	835	4,361
Other	Primary	254	209	394	562	276	1,695
	Post primary	239	179	325	659	228	1,630

2007/08

Religion	School Type	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Protestant	Primary	297	350	770	1,046	419	2,882
	Post primary	657	516	1,189	2,094	490	4,946
Catholic	Primary	338	551	677	749	597	2,912
	Post primary	699	1,145	887	960	800	4,491
Other	Primary	239	225	467	592	303	1,826
	Post primary	243	204	434	691	238	1,810

Source: Annual school census

Note:

Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes

Integrated includes controlled integrated and grant maintained integrated.

'Other' includes 'other Christian', 'non Christian' and 'religion not known/specified/none'.

Ulster-Scots Curriculum Project

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how much her Department invested in the Ulster-Scots curriculum project at Stranmillis University College; and what benefit pupils in schools have derived from it. (AQW 1908/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhliain 2005-06, sholáthair mo Roinn maoiní den mhéid £48,762 don Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrudúcháin agus Mheasúnaithe le obair a dhéanamh le hAonad Forbartha Churaclaim an Ultais i gColáiste na hOllscoile Stranmillis ar chur i láthair ábhar acmhainní bunscolaíochta na hUltaise.

In 2005-06, my Department provided funding of £48,762 to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to work with the Curriculum Development Unit for Ulster-Scots at Stranmillis University College on the production of Ulster-Scots primary resource materials.

A report on the work of the Curriculum Development Unit, commissioned by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and published by the Education and Training Inspectorate this October, indicates that the potential benefits of the primary resource materials

have not been fully realised because of ongoing discussions between the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots Academy

Implementation Group about the standardisation of the written language: the availability of the primary materials is limited to the website of the Ulster Scots Agency.

Salary Spine Points for Qualified Teachers

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of all salary spine points for qualified teachers in the (i) North Eastern Education and Library Board; and (ii) Western Education and Library Board. (AQW 1919/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá miondealú na bpointí uilig ar an scála tuarastal do mhúinteoirí cáilithe i mBoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair agus an Oirthuaiscirt ar fáil sna táblaí thíos.

A breakdown of all salary spine points for qualified teachers in both the Western and North Eastern Education and Library Boards is provided in the enclosed tables;

WELB		NEELB	
Ordinary Pay Scale (OPS)	Teacher numbers	Ordinary Pay Scale (OPS)	Teacher numbers
Pt 1	22	Pt 1	52
Pt 2	37	Pt 2	92
Ordinary Pay Scale (OPS)	Teacher numbers	Ordinary Pay Scale (OPS)	Teacher numbers
Pt 3	73	Pt 3	106
Pt 4	71	Pt 4	147
Pt 5	105	Pt 5	153
Pt 6	202	Pt 6	275
Upper Pay Scale	Teacher numbers	Upper Pay Scale	Teacher numbers
Pt 1	211	Pt 1	382
Pt 2	326	Pt 2	414
Pt 3	1525	Pt 3	1745
Vice Principal	Teacher numbers	Vice Principal	Teacher numbers
Pt 3	4	Pt 3	4
Pt 4	5	Pt 4	4
Pt 5	10	Pt 5	16
Pt 6	11	Pt 6	13
Pt 7	13	Pt 7	19
Pt 8	12	Pt 8	11
Pt 9	14	Pt 9	27
Pt 10	17	Pt 10	15
Pt 11	15	Pt 11	12
Pt 12	12	Pt 12	12
Pt 13	6	Pt 13	12
Pt 14	9	Pt 14	4
Pt 15	6	Pt 15	7
Pt 16	7	Pt 16	10
Pt 17	4	Pt 17	2
Pt 18	4	Pt 18	3
Pt 19	2	Pt 19	2
Pt 20	5	Pt 20	7
Pt 22	1		
Principal	Teacher numbers	Principal	Teacher numbers
Pt 6	1	Pt 6	1
Pt 7	7	Pt 7	9
Pt 8	2	Pt 8	3
Pt 9	15	Pt 9	18

WELB		NEELB	
Principal	Teacher numbers	Principal	Teacher numbers
Pt 10	16	Pt 10	15
Pt 11	19	Pt 11	26
Pt 12	18	Pt 12	20
Pt 13	22	Pt 13	19
Pt 14	18	Pt 14	14
Pt 15	22	Pt 15	29
Pt 16	22	Pt 16	22
Pt 17	17	Pt 17	16
Pt 18	6	Pt 18	18
Pt 19	13	Pt 19	14
Pt 20	9	Pt 20	9
Pt 21	6	Pt 21	13
Pt 22	5	Pt 22	6
Pt 23	3	Pt 23	4
Pt 24	7	Pt 24	5
Pt 25	3	Pt 25	4
Pt 26	2	Pt 26	2
Pt 27	4	Pt 27	4
Pt 28	1	Pt 28	2
Pt 29	1	Pt 29	1
Pt 30	3	Pt 30	1
Pt 32	2	Pt 31	3
Pt 33	1	Pt 32	1

Attacks on Teaching Staff

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of attacks on teaching staff in the Larne and Carrickfergus areas. (AQW 1922/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt gur tharla 29 dteagmhas fionraíochta a bhain le hionsaithe fisiciúla ar mhúinteoirí sna scoileanna uilig laistigh de cheantair comhairle an Latharna agus an Charriag Fhearghusa. Sa bhliain acadúil reatha, go dtí an lá atá iniú ann, tugadh tuairisc ar fhionraí amháin a bhain le hionsaí fisiciúil ar mhúinteoir.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has indicated that during the 2006/07 and 2007/08 academic years there were 29 incidents of suspension relating to physical assaults on teaching staff in all schools within the Larne and Carrickfergus district

council areas. In the current academic year there has been one reported suspension to date for a physical assault on a teacher.

Education and Library Board Chief Executives

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education how many meetings she has had with the Chief Executives of the five Education and Library Boards, since taking up office in May 2007. (AQW 1926/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí 17 gcuinniú san iomlán agam le Príomhfheidhmeannaigh de na cúig Bhórd Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ó chuaigh mé i seilbh oifige i mí Bhealtaine 2007.

Since taking up office in May 2007, I have had a total of 17 meetings with the Chief Executives of the five Education and Library Boards.

Sickness of Teachers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of days lost, in each of the last three years, as a result of sickness of teachers in (i) primary school; and (ii) post primary schools, and broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) school. (AQW 1934/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá socraithe agam go gcuirfean an t-eolas a iarradh i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Stress-Related Illness of Teachers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of days lost, in each of the last three years, as a result of stress-related illness of teachers in (i) primary school; and (ii) post primary schools, and broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) school. (AQW 1935/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá socraithe agam go gcuirfean an t-eolas a iarradh i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Class Sizes

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the work carried out by the Department to reduce class sizes in primary schools. (AQW 1936/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn tionchar ríthábhachtach ag cailíocht an luathfhoghlaime ar dhul chun cinn san oideachas níos déanaí mar sin ó 1998 bíonn sé mar pholasáí na Roinne le ranganna na ndaltaí is oige (bliain 1-4 sa bhunscoil) a choinneáil ar 30 dalta nó níos lú ná sin.

The quality of early learning is vital to later educational progress so since 1998 the Department's policy has been to keep classes for the youngest children (years 1 to 4 of primary school) at 30 or fewer pupils. The Education and Library Boards administer this policy and are responsible for providing any additional funding to primary schools to enable the policy to be achieved. I believe it is very important to further reduce class sizes, this will require substantial investment by the Executive and I look forward to my colleagues' support on the Executive in relation to this.

Sickness Management for Teachers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the support mechanisms in place for sickness management for teachers of (i) primary; and (ii) post primary schools. (AQW 1937/09)

The Minister of Education: A revised Teacher Attendance Procedure was implemented in April 2008 to promote a consistent approach to teacher welfare across all schools and to help schools manage teacher sickness absence. The procedure applies equally to all teachers and provides clear guidance to teachers, Principals, Boards of Governors and employing authorities on their roles and responsibilities. It is published on the Department's website at http://www.deni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_tnc_2008-2_-_teacher_attendance_procedure_final_version.pdf

A range of welfare provision is also available to teachers in both primary and post primary schools, including the services of welfare officers, independent sessions with trained counsellors and referral to occupational health specialists.

Tá aontaithe ag na húdaráis fhostóra ar na mallaibh na seirbhísí rúnda comhairleoireachta atá ann faoi láthair a leathnú agus a chur ar fáil do gach múinteoir trí líne chabhrach teileafóin 24 uair.

The employing authorities have recently agreed to extend existing access to confidential counselling services to all teachers via a 24 hour telephone helpline.

Child Protection Policies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the Department's child protection policies. (AQW 1938/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department's current guidance for schools on child protection matters is set out in the following circulars:

- Circular 1999/10: "Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection" sets out for schools and others guidance on their responsibilities in relation to child protection;
- Circular 2003/13: "Welfare and Protection of Pupils Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003" explains the legal requirements in relation to a school's child protection policy;
- Circular 2006/06: "Child Protection: Recruitment of people to work with children and young people in educational settings" gives guidance for employers on pre employment checking and safer recruitment practices;
- Circular 2006/07: "Child Protection: Employment of substitute teachers" tells schools that only substitute teachers who are on the Substitute Teachers Register can be employed;
- Circular 2006/08: "Child Protection: Training requirements for School Governors on staff recruitment and selection panels" requires that at least one school governor serving on an interview panel must be trained in child protection and recruitment and selection; and
- Circular 2008/03: "Child Protection: Pre-employment checking of persons to work in schools – New arrangements" introduced the new AccessNI arrangements for pre employment checking.

Is féidir teacht ar na himlitreacha seo ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne www.deni.gov.uk agus coinnítear faoi athbhreithniú iad ar bhonn leanúnach.

These circulars can be accessed on the Department's website www.deni.gov.uk and are kept under continuous review.

Job Vacancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many job vacancies there are for teachers in the controlled sector. (AQW 1965/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department seeks information on teacher vacancies from all grant-aided schools on an annual basis. The information provides a "snapshot" of vacancies at a specific date each year. The latest information available identifies vacancies at 2 November 2007, and details for the controlled sector are set out below:

NO. OF VACANCIES STILL TO BE FILLED DURING THE 2007/08 ACADEMIC YEAR AT 2ND NOVEMBER 2007 IN THE CONTROLLED SECTOR

	Full-time, Permanent	Part-time, Permanent	Full-time, Temporary	Part-time, Temporary
Primary ¹	26	6	3	6
Special	6	2	1	0
Post-Primary	20	5	12	9
Total	52	13	16	15

1. Primary includes Nursery, Primary and Preparatory departments of grammar schools.

Tá an Roinn ag iarraidh sonraí ó scoileanna faoi láthair ar fholúntais múinteora atá ann ar 3 Samhain 2008.

The Department is currently seeking data from schools on teacher vacancies which exist at 3 November 2008.

Capital Schemes

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide details of the economic appraisals on capital schemes that have been approved by her Department, since September 2006. (AQW 1972/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá na measúnuithe eacnamaíochta do na scoileanna atá liostaithe sa tábla thíos aontaithe leis an údarás ábhartha agus faofa ó Mheán Fómhair 2006. Baineann siad seo le scoileanna ar tugadh faomhadh dóibh le haghaidh cistithe caipitil sna blianta roimhe seo.

Economic appraisals for the schools identified in the table below have been agreed with the relevant authority and approved since September 2006. These are for schools which have received approval for capital funding in previous years.

School	Date
Banbridge Academy	May 2008
Dromore Central Primary School	June 2007
Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh	March 2007
Eglinton PS	July 2007
Methodist College, Belfast	May 2007
Taughmonagh PS, Belfast	June 2007
Templepatrick PS	July 2007
Towerview PS, Bangor	October 2006
Victoria PS, Ballyhalbert	June 2007
Whitehouse PS, Newtownabbey	July 2007

The following appraisals have also been approved though the schemes do not have approval for capital funding.

School	Date
Antrim PS	June 2008
Ballywalter PS	June 2008
Kilcoan PS/ Mullaghdubh PS	October 2006
Woodburn PS, Carrickfergus	January 2008

In addition, the full business case for the BELB Strategic Partnership Project was approved in March 2008 with funding approval for the following schools:-

- Ashfield Girls High School
- Belfast Boys' Model School
- Belfast Model School for Girls
- Grosvenor Grammar
- Orangefield Primary School

Capital Works Scheme

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the economic appraisal that has been submitted to her Department on to the capital works scheme for Academy Primary School in Saintfield. (AQW 1973/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt dréacht-bhreithmheas eacnamaíochta (EA) do Academy Primary School faoi bhráid na Roinne in Eanáir 2008.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board submitted a draft economic appraisal (EA) to the Department for Academy Primary School in January 2008. The submission however was premature as before an appraisal is completed the need for a capital scheme has to be assessed using information on the condition and suitability of the building. The department is currently considering the information on the school and will be liaising with the SEELB on the next steps.

Communication and Interaction Special Educational Needs

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail how many children have an identified speech, language or communication need, in each Education and Library Board. (AQW 2118/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

Pupils with an identified communication and interaction Special Educational Need – 2007/08

School Level	ELB					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Nursery schools	149	129	167	209	57	711
Primary	939	1,334	1,016	1,228	1,240	5,757
Post primary	257	337	287	298	472	1,651
Special	535	492	675	672	349	2,723
Total	1,880	2,292	2,145	2,407	2,118	10,842

Source: school census in the north of Ireland

Note:

1. Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
2. The communication and interaction Special Educational Need type also includes speech and language difficulties, autism and Aspergers.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Sector Skills Councils

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the Sector Skills Councils that have received funding from his Department through the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils; (ii) the amounts received; (iii) the activities the councils are running to promote understanding of their work amongst (a) employers; (b) employer organisations; and (c) other stakeholders. (AQW 1539/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):

- (i) The Department for Employment and Learning does not provide funding to Sector Skills Councils through the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils.
- (ii) The Department provides direct funding to the Sector Skills Councils to undertake relevant Northern Ireland projects. In a recent bidding round, the Department agreed to support 28 new projects, totalling £571, 987. The Department has also provided funding of £96,000 to support

Alliance activities in Northern Ireland between 1st August 2008 and 31st March 2009.

(iii) (a) Sector Skills Councils use a range of activities to promote understanding of their work amongst employers. Examples of this work include:

- Attending relevant seminars and conferences; giving presentations; manning exhibition stands and distributing marketing literature;
- Attending Northern Ireland employer Country Groups;
- Regular contact with the six employer-led Workforce Development Forums.

(b) Sector Skills Councils have established large electronic databases of employers, trade organisations and other partners and use this resource to promote regular updates via electronic and hard-copy material such as policy updates, case studies and new initiatives. They also work directly with employer organisations by attending meetings, workshops, and seminars.

(c) The Sector Skills Councils have regular contact and exchange of information with key stakeholders, and they work collectively through the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils to promote their activities. One of the key roles of the Alliance is to build awareness of the activities of the Sector Skills Councils, through the development of promotional material, and participation in conferences, seminars, road-shows and exhibitions.

Sector Skills Councils

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to (i) detail how many Sector Skills Agreements have been launched during 2008; (ii) detail the funding his Department is providing for the agreements; and (iii) confirm if his Department's work with the Sector Skills Councils will reach the stated target of 25 agreements by December 2008.

(AQW 1541/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) In 2008, eight Sector Skills Agreements were officially approved by the Northern Ireland Project Board. This brings the total number of Sector Skills Agreements approved to twenty-three.
- (ii) The Department does not fund the Sector Skills Agreements process as this is core business for the Sector Skills Councils and is funded by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The Department did, however, provide funding for the production of Northern Ireland Labour

Market Information to inform some of the Sector Skills Agreements. In a recent bidding round the Department agreed to fund twenty-eight projects, taking forward Northern Ireland actions identified in the Agreements.

- (iii) At present twenty-three of the twenty-five Sector Skills Agreements have been approved by the Northern Ireland Project Board. It is expected that the remaining two will be approved by the end of December 2008.

Education Campuses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if all third level education campuses operate an equality agenda in their student union.

(AQW 1552/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Under legislation such as Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, all third level institutions are required to ensure equality of opportunity in their respective campuses, including their student unions.

Education Campuses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if all third level education campuses operate a shared space agenda in their student union.

(AQW 1553/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I

understand that all third level campuses are already operating shared space agendas in their respective student unions. Each institution has in place policies and procedures governing the shared use of student union facilities. These are detailed in the respective student union's constitution, which also details the rights and privileges of their members.

Education Campuses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will ensure that all third level education campuses operate a shared space and equality agenda in their student union. (AQW 1554/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Under legislation such as Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, all third level institutions are required to ensure equality of opportunity in their respective campuses, including their student unions. I understand all third level campuses are already operating shared space and equality agendas in their student unions.

Student Loans

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many graduates from Northern Ireland are deferring payment on their student loans because their current level of income is below the repayment threshold. (AQW 1579/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of Northern Ireland students who have deferred repayments on mortgage style loans because their income level is below the current repayment threshold of £25,936 per annum, is 7,274.

Income contingent loans replaced mortgage style loans in academic year 1998/1999. Latest figures from the Student Loans Company show that the number of Northern Ireland students not in a repayment channel because their earnings are below the repayment threshold of £15,000 per annum is 9,757.

Training for Success Initiative

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the discussions his Department has had with young people with disabilities or interested groups, on the roll out of the Department's Training for Success initiative. (AQW 1615/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department meets regularly with organisations, who provide specialist support on its Training for Success initiative, including Disability Action, Sensory Learning Support and the Cedar Foundation.

I have also had the opportunity to meet young people associated with Dr B's Kitchen, Include Youth and the Bytes Project. This includes young people with disabilities and additional needs.

As you are aware, the Training for Success Disability Working Group presented its report recently. In its review, the Group undertook a survey of young people with disabilities in a 16 to 24 age range. In addition, the Group held consultation meetings with a number of key stakeholders, including disability organisations that represent the interests of young people with disabilities.

In its report, the Group encourages the Department to engage directly with young people with disabilities. They see this as crucial to the success of the provision, in gathering their views and concerns in order to determine how the provision is meeting their learning and support requirements.

As I outlined in my letter to you of 13 October 2008, I will write to you again outlining the way forward once I have had the opportunity to consider the Group's recommendations.

Forensic Psychologists

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to provide training courses for forensic psychologists. (AQW 1710/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The University of Ulster advises that a working group comprising representatives from the University's School of Psychology, the Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society and stakeholders from the Forensic community are currently involved in a series of meetings to explore the feasibility of postgraduate training in Forensic Psychology. The group has met on three occasions during 2008. As a first step the group has agreed to run a jointly sponsored Forensic Psychology event to publicise what Forensic psychology can offer potential employers and agencies in the region. This will take place in the spring of 2009.

In the context of these discussions, the School of Psychology is considering the development of a fully accredited Postgraduate Diploma and Masters in Forensic Psychology.

Queen's University advises that its School of Psychology is planning a major expansion of postgraduate taught courses and, subject to satisfactory planning and business cases, Forensic Psychology is one option being considered for delivery.

Acute Learning Disabilities

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to help those with acute learning disabilities to find sustainable employment. (AQW 1743/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning has a range of assistance to help people with disabilities, including severe learning disabilities, find and keep employment. This assistance is not targeted at people with specific disabilities. Pathways to Work Personal Advisers and Team Leaders based in Jobs & Benefits Offices/Jobcentres are trained to help customers find suitable jobs and identify support to help keep the job. Advisers have a menu of programmes and services to assist customers, which includes: assessment by Department's Occupational Psychologists; a Work Preparation Programme; Permitted Work; Access to Work (NI), and; Workable (NI). Programmes and services have been designed to be flexible to meet individually assessed client needs.

The Department also assists people with disabilities through funding from the European Social Fund Programme 2007-13 which helps unemployed people at a disadvantage in the labour market, into sustainable

employment. A total of 14 projects for participants with disabilities and health conditions, were successful and have been awarded £18.5m for 3 years ending 31 March 2011. While this includes people with acute learning disabilities, there is no dedicated allocation of funding for specific target groups.

Construction Trade

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what procedures his Department has put in place to ensure that apprentices can complete their training given the current down-turn in the construction trade. (AQW 1807/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The construction industry in Northern Ireland is currently facing a downturn, particularly in the housing market. Nevertheless, the Department will continue to fund training in construction occupations to support the industry according to need highlighted with the Sector Skills Council.

The Department has received evidence of some 230 apprentices at the six FE Colleges having been made redundant. This would represent about 4% of the total apprentices currently on programme. 164 of these people were in construction training. However, when compared to the same period last year, the level of early leavers that could be attributed to reasons such as unemployment, is not significantly different.

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. Alternatively, they can undertake skills training and qualifications in a different occupational area, if they so choose.

The Department is currently considering introducing other alternative arrangements to ensure that both Level 2 and Level 3 apprentices can continue with training, and we hope to be in a position to make a formal announcement on these plans shortly.

Trade Apprentices

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact the current economic downturn is having on the ability of trade apprentices to commence or complete their apprenticeships; and what actions his Department is

taking to ensure that apprenticeships are still available. (AQW 1843/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Certain industries in Northern Ireland are facing a downturn.

The Department has received evidence of some 230 apprentices at the six FE Colleges having been made redundant. This would represent about 4% of the total apprentices currently on programme. 164 of these people were in construction training. However, when compared to the same period last year, the level of early leavers that could be attributed to reasons such as unemployment, is not significantly different.

Where the economic downturn appears to be having greater effect is in the recruitment of new apprentices to undertake training, where certain sectors are reporting a reduction of 50% or more.

Under Training for Success, however, 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 and who wish to continue working towards achieving a professional and technical qualification. Alternatively, they can undertake skills training and qualifications in a different occupational area, if they so choose.

For older apprentices that become unemployed, the Department is considering options that will allow them to gain work experience while maintaining their eligibility to claim benefits. This may include a placement under Steps to Work.

Some further work is required on developing these options and I hope to make an announcement on these soon.

St Mary's University College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the representatives on the Board of Governors of St Mary's University College from (i) the Catholic Church; and (ii) the Protestant Churches. (AQW 1898/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: St Mary's University College have advised that (i) the following members of the College's Board of Governors are from the Catholic Church:

The Bishop of Down and Connor : The Most Rev Dr Noel Treanor (Chairman)

One of his Vicar Generals : The Most Rev Donal McKeown

Irish Regional Vicar, Cabra Dominicans : Sr Lucina Montague OP

Six Governors are nominated by the Trustees of the College

- Archdiocese of Armagh : Rt Rev Mgr Liam McEntegart PP
- Dioceses of Clogher / Kilmore : Mrs Joan Hart
- Diocese of Derry : Very Rev Robert Devine PP
- Diocese of Down and Connor : Mr Charles MacCreanor
- Diocese of Dromore : Mrs Ann Doran
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) : Rt Rev Mgr Colm McCaughan

(ii) There are no representatives on the Board of Governors from the Protestant Churches.

Teacher Training

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the ratio is for teacher training between Protestants and Catholics, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1901/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The percentages of Protestant and Catholic students enrolled on initial teacher training courses at Northern Ireland Higher Education institutions, whose religious affiliation was known, in each of the last 3 available years are detailed in the table below:

	Protestant	Catholic
2004/05	54%	46%
2005/06	49%	51%
2006/07	47%	53%

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Percentages are based on figures that have been rounded to the nearest 5 and include those initial teacher training enrolments at Queen's University Belfast, the University of Ulster, Stranmillis University College and St. Mary's University College.

Responses to religious affiliation questions are not mandatory and therefore these questions have high non-response rates (17% in 2004/05, 10% in 2005/06 and 9% in 2006/07 for students on initial teacher training courses at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions).

St Mary's University College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of students at St Mary's University College have a Protestant background. (AQW 1902/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In the 2006/07 academic year, 1.5% of students at St. Mary's University College, whose religious affiliation was known, had a Protestant background.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Percentages are based on figures that have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Responses to religious affiliation questions are not mandatory and therefore these questions have high non-response rates (12% for students at St. Mary's University College in 2006/07).

St Mary's University College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many lecturers in St Mary's University College have a Protestant background. (AQW 1905/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: St Mary's University College advises that there are currently five lecturers employed who have indicated from Equal Opportunities monitoring that they are from a Protestant background.

Stranmillis University College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of students at Stranmillis University College have a Catholic background. (AQW 1906/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In the 2006/07 academic year, 16.5% of students at Stranmillis University College, whose religious affiliation was known, had a Catholic background.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Percentages are based on figures that have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Responses to religious affiliation questions are not mandatory and therefore these questions have high non-response rates (13% for students at Stranmillis University College in 2006/07).

Teacher Training

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many teacher training places there have

been in Stranmillis University College in each of the last 4 years. (AQW 1960/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of teacher training places funded by my Department in Stranmillis University College, in each of the last 4 academic years, has been:

	B.Ed	PGCE	Total
2005/06	792	40	832
2006/07	739	30	769
2007/08	674	20	694
2008/09	615	15	630

The Department of Education is responsible for setting the annual Initial Teacher Education (ITE) student intake numbers for each institution.

Teacher Training

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many teacher training places there have been in St Mary's University College in each of the last 4 years. (AQW 1961/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of teacher training places funded by my Department in St Mary's University College, in each of the last 4 academic years, has been:

	B.Ed	PGCE	Total
2005/06	769	16	785
2006/07	732	16	748
2007/08	632	16	648
2008/09	591	22	613

The Department of Education is responsible for setting the annual Initial Teacher Education (ITE) student intake numbers for each institution.

Teacher Training

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many teacher training places there have been at Queen's University Belfast, in each of the last 4 years. (AQW 1962/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of teacher training places funded by my Department at Queen's University Belfast, in each of the last 4 academic years, has been:

	B.Ed	PGCE	Total
2005/06	-	205	205
2006/07	-	205	205
2007/08	-	193	193
2008/09	-	181	181

The Department of Education is responsible for setting the annual Initial Teacher Education (ITE) student intake numbers for each institution.

Concessionary Fees

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he intends to discuss with his counterpart in Scotland, Wales and Westminster. reinstating concessionary fees for all pensioners who register for courses at further education colleges in the UK. (AQW 1971/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

As you know through recent correspondence, I have considerable sympathy with the issue you have raised. However, as I indicated in my letter of 20 October 2008 to you, the UK is currently considering a European Directive that would extend age discrimination to the provision of goods, facilities and services. This would bring the treatment of these services more into line with the current Employment Equality (Age) Regulations. Therefore, the outcome of these considerations is likely to have an impact on any changes that might be made to the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations.

I have already had discussions with my Westminster Counterpart, Mr Bill Rammell and I have asked my officials to monitor developments in these areas in the UK, and to keep me informed of the position on a regular basis.

Pathway Personal Advisers

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 361/09, which agency or group provides the training to Pathway Personal Advisers; and, in the absence of medical training or qualifications on what basis does a Personal Adviser (i) decide to signpost a client to particular support; and (ii) assess the support that would benefit a client most. (AQW 1982/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Training for Pathways Personal Advisers is provided by the Department's Staff Development Unit supported where appropriate, by the Occupational Psychology Service, Medical Support Services and contracted specialists. Pathways Personal Advisers are trained to

explore with clients their prospects of returning to work at a series of up to six work-focused interviews. (i) Decisions to signpost a client to a particular support are based on information the client provides in the course of an interview and the knowledge gained through training; and (ii) assessing the support that would benefit a client most is also based on the information the client provides in the course of an interview and the knowledge gained through training. At no time are clients compelled to avail of any particular support: participation in any work-related activity or seeking further medical intervention is voluntary.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Tourism Targets

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in light of the current economic climate, what measures are in place to ensure that tourism targets are met. (AQW 1421/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Despite the current economic climate, the strategic direction for tourism remains unchanged.

In the short term we are taking a number of measures to address the challenges of the current economic climate. These include:

- Ensuring quality and value for money – these will be key determinants of success, offering competitive advantage;
- Increasing the E-marketing role such as discovernorthernireland.com;
- Developing further the closer to home markets which have the greatest potential to offer a return on investment;
- Taking advantage of the strength of the Euro - the strong Euro offers a competitive advantage for residents and international visitors in the Republic of Ireland and European markets with direct access routes;
- Holidaying in the sterling zone is currently more attractive for the Great Britain market
- Targetting of local companies to host major conferences at home; and
- The potential of the resident population for both day trips and holidays at home must also be maximised

Northern Ireland Tourist Board will continue to focus on the delivery of its Corporate Plan objectives to ensure the development of a long term sustainable tourism industry for Northern Ireland.

Tourism Ireland will continue to partner NITB and Northern Ireland industry effectively to market our way through current and forthcoming difficulties.

Tourism Ireland will also deliver world-class marketing programmes in 2009 to ensure that Northern Ireland achieves competitive standout in key markets despite the challenges.

Experience shows that maintaining a strong marketing presence during uncertain times, pays dividend. By 2007, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were among only a few European destinations to have recovered fully from the downturn in travel from the US which followed the 9/11 attacks. Tourism Ireland's strategy is to maintain its promotional presence in major markets during this period to ensure that Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, is well positioned for recovery when consumer confidence resumes.

Invest NI

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for (i) a timescale; and (ii) terms of reference, in relation to a review of Invest NI. (AQW 1496/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the review have been developed and the overall aim is to ensure that DETI and Invest NI policies and programmes are targeted to help achieve the goals outlined in the Programme for Government. The current project brief in the draft ToR indicates that the review would need to consider and make recommendations in the following areas:

- (a) The current and forecasted performance of the Northern Ireland economy, relative to other regions with access to similar policy instruments, programmes and resources;
- (b) Current DETI/Invest NI policies and programmes, with an assessment of their effectiveness in stimulating productivity improvements, particularly within manufacturing and private services;
- (c) Policy options to stimulate economic growth / productivity and build a larger and more wealth creating private sector, particularly in financial and value added business services;
- (d) How NI can further attract value added FDI and promote domestic investment;
- (e) Review and advise on the structure and remit of Invest NI and the existing governance arrangements between DETI, DFP and Invest NI;

- (f) Identify any issues which may inhibit the delivery of the productivity goal which fall to other Departments in the NI Executive, particularly DEL (in relation to skills) and DRD (in relation to regional planning and infrastructure investment);
- (g) Consider the optimal way by which the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment engages with key stakeholders on economic development issues; and
- (h) Consider whether any improvements could be made to DETI and Invest NI's working links within the NI Executive and on an east/west and north/south basis.
- (i) The sub-regional distribution of inward investment and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment.

The draft ToR have been shared with both the Executive and the ETI Committee. These are being finalised following the Committee's response of 21st October 2008. The Department is also currently working on the practical arrangements necessary to establish the review, including membership of the Review Panel. Once the Panel is established, a programme of work and associated timescales will be agreed.

Invest NI

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the body that will conduct a review of Invest NI. (AQW 1497/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department is currently working on the practical arrangements necessary to establish the review, including the membership of the review panel. This is an important exercise that will advise on current and future economic development policy in Northern Ireland. I am therefore seeking to appoint high calibre individuals with relevant experience and expertise.

Invest NI

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report on how the additionality of the efforts of Invest NI is measured in relation to decisions on investment. (AQW 1525/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Additionality is a key criterion in Invest NI's decision on whether or not to support an investment and in determining the amount of support offered.

Any company seeking financial assistance must demonstrate that Invest NI support is essential to enable their investment project to proceed. Additionality

may also be satisfied where Invest NI assistance can influence the proposed nature, scale, timing or location of a project. Invest NI provides the minimum support necessary for the project to proceed.

Invest NI subjects all applications for support to an appraisal and approval process commensurate with the level of funds sought and the risk associated with the proposed investment project. For example:

- All projects seeking support in excess of £250,000 are subjected to a full commercial or economic appraisal conducted either by Invest NI's Corporate Finance Appraisal & Advisory Division (CFAAD) or by an independent third party;
- Professional economist advice is incorporated into all submissions for support over £1 million, ensuring HM Treasury guidance is adhered to; and,
- Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment must secure the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel for internationally mobile investment projects where support exceeds £10 million and for non-mobile projects where support exceeds £6 million.

As well as the consideration of additionality at project appraisal, Invest NI schemes of support are subject to regular evaluation to ensure that they are necessary and that they are delivered in the most appropriate and cost-effective manner.

Inventors of New Technology

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what assistance, both financial and otherwise, is available to inventors of new technology. (AQW 1556/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI recognises the importance of technological innovation and offers a broad range of professional advice and financial incentives to support individual inventors, businesses and academic researchers wishing to develop new ideas and inventions.

Incentives include support for research and development, technology transfer and the provision of a venture capital fund focussed specifically on early stage technology ventures. Invest NI also provides specialist Intellectual Property advice covering Patents, Registered Design, Trade Marks and Copyright.

Ferry Companies

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations she has made to ferry companies in relation to the cost of ferry crossings between Northern Ireland and Great Britain

compared to the cost of equivalent services between Great Britain and France. (AQW 1573/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The ferry services which operate between Northern Ireland and Great Britain are provided by private sector companies and fare levels are a matter for their commercial judgement. I have not made representations to the ferry companies.

GAA Games

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what significant GAA games have been featured on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board website, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1642/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) features events and sporting activities on its website when it is notified of these, when they are likely to be relevant to tourists and consistent with NITB's corporate plans and objectives and when they are of national and international prominence.

NITB retains full editorial control of its website and the information it carries. Sporting events of national and international prominence which the GAA consider might be included on NITB's website should be forwarded to NITB by e-mailing events@nitb.com.

NITB has received no communication from the GAA about sporting events which the GAA considers may be of interest to tourists and thus no Gaelic games have been featured on its consumer website.

Ferry Companies

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department has any powers to regulate the prices charged by ferry companies travelling to Scotland. (AQW 1647/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The ferry services which operate between Northern Ireland and Scotland are provided by private sector companies and fare levels are a matter for their commercial judgement. My Department does not have a regulatory role in respect of the level of fares set by the private sector ferry companies.

Data Sharing Between Government Agencies

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential for data sharing between government agencies and utilities to facilitate a pricing structure that better

reflects the consumers' ability to pay for electricity, gas and water. (AQW 1783/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: My Department does not currently hold relevant personal data which could be utilised to assist the utility companies in devising a pricing structure which reflects the consumers' ability to pay for electricity and gas.

However my Department works in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR), and the respective energy companies in establishing ways for customers to avail of the most appropriate payment method, and to reduce their overall energy use through a number of practical energy saving schemes. All of the energy utility companies have put in place a number of initiatives to help ensure each customer's billing structure best reflects their financial circumstances, eg. customers can avail of pre-payment meters for gas and electricity, and other appropriate discounts.

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) is responsible for Northern Ireland Water, and advises that in preparation for the planned introduction of domestic charging in April 2007, NI Water obtained property address details from the (then) Valuation and Lands Agency. In addition, domestic customer details were obtained on a "one off" basis from the (then) Rate Collection Agency. To service the Affordability Tariff, which was part of the original domestic charging proposals, recipients of Housing Benefit and Rate Relief would have automatically qualified for the reduced tariff for low income customers.

DRD also advises that following the deferral of domestic charging in April 2007, Northern Ireland Water no longer has the benefit of legislation to update the domestic customer database through data sharing with Land and Property Services. In the event of additional household payments going ahead, a future Affordability Tariff could be serviced through data sharing for benefit claimants under Article 264 of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006.

There may be potential for other Departments to share data with the utility providers. For example the DSD Fuel Poverty Taskforce is at the very early stages of examining the possibility of legislation to permit it to more effectively share benefit-related data, in order to establish how any initiatives to assist the fuel poor might be targeted.

However, in any circumstance, the sharing of personal data can only be facilitated within the confines of the relevant legislation such as the Data Protection Act, and this may limit the potential for greater sharing of information.

Executive Meetings

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her answer to AQO640/09, how the Executive's failure to meet is impacting on her efforts to promote investment from the United States of America. (AQW 1787/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We know from our discussions with potential overseas investors that economic and political stability is an important issue and investors will take an interest in the current status of the Executive.

However Invest Northern Ireland's international sales and marketing emphasis is to promote all areas of Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities, in what is a very competitive global market.

As part of my personal efforts, I travelled to both East and West Coasts of the US in October, where I took the opportunity to meet with potential investors and follow up with attendees of May's USNI conference. On the West Coast I participated in Invest NI's 'Trade Mission to USA - 26-31 October'. The companies on this mission were representative of Northern Ireland's innovative and diversified industrial base.

Invest Northern Ireland is conscious of the importance of global economic conditions and remain confident that the Northern Ireland business proposition is a highly-competitive alternative to other regions of the British Isles or Western Europe.

Although the growing uncertainty and global economic downturn means many companies are tightening their belts and are increasingly focused on cost containment and deferring investment decisions; several firms in the region are firmly focused on opportunities for continued growth and new projects. Recent announcements reflect US companies' belief in the competitive proposition that NI has to offer. Be assured that the Northern Ireland value proposition will continue to be promoted strongly to potential investors in all its markets.

Environmental and Rural Development Fund

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (i) confirm that on 27 February 2006 the Northern Ireland Secretary of State launched a £59.2m Environmental and Rural Development Fund for promoting the development and use of renewable energy; and (ii) provide a breakdown of how her Department directed this allocation. (AQW 1904/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I can confirm that the former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, launched the £59.2m Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF) on 27th February 2006. The objective of the Fund was to enhance and accelerate renewables development in Northern Ireland.

A breakdown of the funding allocation is attached below:-

Department/ Project	Allocation (£ million)
DETI	
Carbon Trust activities	2.128
Energy from Waste flagship projects (figure shown represents a transfer of £2m to DSD in year)	16
Energy Research programmes	1.5
Integrated Communications Strategy	1.119
Action Renewables	2.267
Departmental running costs	0.216
Reconnect (including management costs)	8.463
DSD	
Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency in social housing (housing associations)	0.5
Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency in social housing (NIHE) (includes £2m transferred from DETI)	5.2
Energy Efficiency in private housing (Warm Homes)	9.8
Renewable Energy for Fuel poverty owner occupiers	1.295
DFP	
Government Office estate – biomass boiler on Stormont Estate and PV/Solar on government buildings	3.1
Central Energy Efficiency Fund	2.83
DARD	
Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence AFBI Hillsborough	2.345
Bioenergy research, technology transfer and commercial demonstration at farm level Demonstration (CAFRE)	1.852
DOE	
Ecological Footprint	0.285
OFMDFM	
Sustainable Development Communications Strategy	0.300
TOTAL	59.2

ENVIRONMENT

Student Housing

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he has given to an inter-departmental strategy for developing purpose built student housing to alleviate problems associated with houses of multiple occupancy, in areas such as South Belfast.

(AQW 1612/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):

My predecessor, Arlene Foster, visited the Holylands area in South Belfast with you and heard at first hand some of the issues facing the community, including the adverse impact that HMOs can have on an area.

The issues surrounding HMOs are multi-faceted and cannot be tackled by one Department or Agency. Arlene Foster has endorsed the joint working approach of the Inter Agency Group which was set up under the chairmanship of the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council. I agree that a multi agency approach is necessary and that, through the Inter Agency Group, Planning Service can make a significant contribution to addressing a range of issues in the Holylands area.

As part of its contribution to the Inter Agency Group, Planning Service has undertaken consultation on a Draft HMO Subject Plan for Belfast aimed at addressing a range of issues. Work is progressing on the Subject Plan and it is hoped it will be formally adopted later this year.

Arlene Foster made a statement on 12 June 2008 outlining further steps she would consider in order to further consolidate this policy framework. One step related to purpose built student housing and she stated that she would enter into discussions with Ministerial colleagues with a view to the establishment of an inter-departmental group to examine the scope for alternative student accommodation and thereby further reduce the current number of HMOs in areas such as the Holylands. I would intend to build further on the work that has already been undertaken and to enter into discussions as is considered appropriate.

My colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, has indicated that Queen's University, the University of Ulster and Stranmillis University College already provide purpose built student accommodation on, or near, their respective campuses. The University of Ulster in particular, contends that it cannot compel students to live on-campus. Research conducted by the University has shown that students who live in private rented accommodation have made a positive choice to do so because of their desire for independence. The respective institutions

also report that their accommodation does not operate at full occupancy.

Finally, I would agree with the Minister for Employment and Learning that whilst responsibility for Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) rests with the Department for Social Development, my Department is also content to be involved in the development of any inter-departmental strategy on this issue.

Québec Driving Licence

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware that arrangements with the Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ), whereby drivers from Northern Ireland did not have to take a further driving test to be issued with a Québec driving licence, have collapsed, putting Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) registered drivers at a disadvantage compared with other UK drivers; and to detail (i) how this problem arose; and (ii) the action he is taking to restore the benefits previously afforded to DVA registered drivers.

(AQW 1636/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no reciprocal licence exchange arrangements between Northern Ireland and any of the provinces and territories of Canada. Until recently, the legal powers relating to licence exchange in Northern Ireland were such that, if Canada were to be designated, the Department would be obliged to accept all Canadian licences tendered for exchange. However, although it is generally accepted that the driving standards in Canada are similar to those in Northern Ireland, it was not considered desirable to accept all Canadian licences, as Canadian driving licences did not indicate whether a person had passed a driving test in a car equipped with automatic transmission, or if the licence had been issued in exchange for one originating in a country which may not have been assessed against Northern Ireland's strict standards. Great Britain has, in contrast, amended its powers of designation, and is able to exclude certain licences from the exchange arrangements.

The necessary primary power to amend the Northern Ireland system of designation for licensing purposes was brought into force on 15th November 2007. However, before this power can be made effective, additional legislation is required, in the form of a Designation Order. The Department is now in the process of preparing legislation to bring Northern Ireland into line with the arrangements that exist for Great Britain licence holders. It is planned that the Designation Order will be in force in Spring 2009.

The Designation Order will allow DVA to enter into bilateral reciprocity agreements with the same provinces and territories as have negotiated

agreements with DVLA in Great Britain. Once in place, both the Northern Ireland and Canadian driver licensing authorities will be in a position to begin the exchange process, subject to a range of conditions being met.

Climate Change

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment to clarify if the assessment given on the causes of climate change in his answer to AQW 181/09 is his own, or that of his Department. (AQW 1652/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The assessment given in my answer to AQW 181/09 is mine. My Departmental officials' role is to provide me, as the Minister, with considered and balanced advice on policy issues which I can then use, together with any other information that I consider pertinent.

Loss of Moorland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with environmentalists in relation to the loss of moorland and the effect this is having on increasing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint. (AQW 1653/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Peatland and Upland Biodiversity Delivery Group (BDG) is a cross-sectoral group established and chaired by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to help maintain the area and improve the condition of moorland habitats included in the Northern Ireland Habitat Action Plans. The BDG includes representatives from Queens University Belfast, the Committee for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Peatlands are large stores of organic matter that also function as carbon stores. This has been recognised by BDG. NIEA has recently joined the DEFRA Peat Partnership Project, a major collaborative UK wide project assessing the biodiversity and environmental benefits of conserving moorland and peatlands.

Loss of Moorland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with landowners to encourage the retention and preservation of (i) heath land; and (ii) moorland, to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint. (AQW 1655/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The main point of contact between the Department of the Environment and heathland and moorland landowners is through the declaration of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. In these situations landowners are encouraged to manage their land sensitively and with a view to preserving the peatland.

While peatlands on heathland and moorland do form significant carbon stores, ASSIs are declared primarily to protect habitats and the biodiversity they support.

Antrim Castle

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the collapse of the walls at Antrim Castle; and to detail (i) the information held by his Department explaining the collapse; and (ii) the investigations that are on going. (AQW 1667/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The walls at the Castle are scheduled for protection under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995. Under the terms of that Order, it remains the responsibility of the owner, in this case Antrim Borough Council, to care for the monument. That would include commissioning any report on the cause of the collapse. It is also the owner's responsibility to undertake any remedial works. At this stage, the Department does not have information explaining why the wall collapsed. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) awaits the outcome of investigations that are underway by Antrim Borough Council and will provide advice, and, as appropriate, grant Scheduling Monument Consent for any agreed programme of remedial works.

Disposal of Used Batteries

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to provide more facilities for the disposal of used batteries. (AQW 1681/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is due to consult in December on UK wide regulations transposing the Batteries Directive. The Regulations will require retailers to take back waste portable batteries and battery producers to take back other waste batteries.

The Regulations are scheduled to be made in spring 2009 and once implemented the number of collection points for waste batteries in Northern Ireland will increase. Collection targets placed on battery producers will mean that facilities for waste batteries

are likely to be set up at civic amenity sites, at retail outlets and in many public buildings.

Litter Fines

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of litter fines that have been issued; and (ii) the monetary value of these fines, in each of the last 5 years, broken down by council area. (AQW 1723/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department does not hold the information requested for the 2003/04 year. The number of fixed penalty notices issued for litter offences together with the monetary value of those notices for the next 4 years is set out in the table below. The Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, as amended, specifies the amount of the fixed penalty as £50.

Council	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Antrim BC	6 (£300)	25 (£1250)	7 (£350)	17 (£850)
Ards BC	25 (£1250)	26 (£1300)	26 (£1300)	12 (£600)
Armagh City & DC	15 (£750)	45 (£2250)	31 (£1550)	13 (£650)
Ballymena BC	38 (£1900)	42 (£2100)	13 (£650)	26 (£1300)
Ballymoney BC	1 (£50)	41 (£2050)	68 (£3400)	17 (£850)
Banbridge DC	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	2 (£100)	13 (£650)
Belfast CC	1146 (£57300)	1557 (£77850)	1174 (£58700)	1790 (£89500)
Carrickfergus BC	16 (£800)	3 (£150)	17 (£850)	18 (£900)
Castlereagh BC	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	20 (£1000)
Coleraine BC	76 (£3800)	62 (£3100)	74 (£3700)	X
Cookstown DC	11 (£550)	6 (£300)	62 (£3100)	44 (£2200)
Craigavon BC	X	85 (£4250)	192 (£9600)	349 (£17450)
Derry CC	11 (£550)	67 (£3350)	63 (£3150)	X
Down DC	1 (£50)	1 (£50)	9 (£450)	22 (£1100)
Dungannon & South Tyrone BC	0 (£0)	4 (£200)	0 (£0)	3 (£150)
Fermanagh DC	X	X	X	X
Larne BC	30 (£1500)	63 (£3150)	50 (£2500)	197 (£9850)
Limavady BC	9 (£450)	8 (£400)	9 (£450)	5 (£250)
Lisburn CC	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	6 (£300)	7 (£350)
Magherafelt DC	9 (£450)	22 (£1100)	17 (£850)	17 (£850)
Moyle DC	2 (£100)	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	2 (£100)

Council	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Newry & Mourne DC	21 (£1050)	18 (£900)	24 (£1200)	24 (£1200)
Newtownabbey BC	8 (£400)	2 (£100)	42 (£2100)	117 (£5850)
North Down BC	7 (£350)	22 (£1100)	24 (£1200)	23 (£1150)
Omagh DC	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	X	60 (£3000)
Strabane DC	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	0 (£0)	0 (£0)

Note: X = information not held by the Department

MOT Tests

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he has taken to promote the penalties associated with driving a vehicle without tax or a MOT test certificate. (AQW 1731/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The enforcement of non compliance with vehicle testing is a matter for the police through either the fixed penalty procedure or by prosecution. The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) issue reminders to vehicle keepers when their vehicle first requires a test certificate or their certificate needs to be renewed. More recently, the Agency introduced mandatory display of vehicle test certificates to promote compliance and make detection of non compliance easier. A publicity campaign detailing the penalties associated with non display of discs was conducted as part of the introduction of mandatory display.

DVA also issues reminders to the keepers of vehicles about 3 weeks before their tax discs expire and these reminders point out that vehicles must be licensed and also give further details of the penalties for using a vehicle on the road if a statutory off road notification (SORN) is in force. The Agency also runs television, radio and billboard advertising campaigns regularly warning motorists about the consequences of failing to have a tax disc.

In addition, DVA employs a number of highly visible measures to detect non-complying vehicles. The Agency participates in a UK-wide contract with NCP for the detection, clamping and removal of unlicensed vehicles and also operates a number of camera detection units. High profile joint operations have been carried out with the police, including “Operation Evader” in Belfast in September during which 320 unlicensed vehicles were clamped.

Road Safety

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the importance of the MOT test in relation to road safety. (AQW 1732/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The purpose of the vehicle test, commonly known as the MOT test, is to ensure that vehicles that are subject to this test (such as cars and motor cycles) meet minimum EU environmental and road safety standards. Such vehicles must comply with the key performance requirements in the Construction and Use and Lighting Regulations.

Possession of a current vehicle certificate does not of course mean that the vehicle is roadworthy for the life of the certificate. It is not therefore a substitute for regular maintenance, although the requirement for the test does encourage motorists to maintain their vehicles.

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that the existence of a vehicle testing system like the MOT has a significant impact on road safety. Studies have suggested that 4-5% of road traffic collisions are directly attributable to vehicle defects and research in the EU and America has indicated that a vehicle testing system can reduce road traffic collisions by between 5 and 17%.

MOT Tests

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what steps the Department is taking to promote the law concerning the MOT test and vehicle tax.
(AQW 1733/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency DVA have taken a number of actions to improve the level of compliance with vehicle testing in Northern Ireland. These have included the issuing of vehicle test reminders to vehicle owners shortly before a test is due, the publication of an information leaflet on vehicle testing and its impact on road safety, and, most recently, the introduction of the mandatory display of vehicle test certificates, with an associated publicity campaign.

In addition, if a vehicle requires a vehicle test certificate, that certificate must be checked before the vehicle can be licensed.

The collection of vehicle excise duty is pursued robustly by DVA. The registered keepers of vehicles are sent a reminder about 3 weeks before their tax disc is due to expire and keepers who fail to either renew their licence or make a statutory off road notification receive a penalty notice. In addition, the Agency runs television, radio and poster advertising campaigns regularly warning motorists of the consequences of using unlicensed vehicles.

MOT Tests

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what advice his Department provides to motorcycle

owners whose MOT certificates have expired but who need to ride their motorcycles to utilise the services of a mechanic.
(AQW 1734/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The advice the Department's Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) gives to a motorcycle owner in these circumstances is that a motorcycle without a valid MOT certificate cannot be legally driven on a public road, except when bringing the motorcycle to or from a test centre for a previously booked appointment or to or from a place where the vehicle is being repaired after the refusal of an MOT certificate.

Sewerage Systems

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail action taken against construction companies who have not completed sewerage systems at building sites to the required standard in the last 5 years.
(AQW 1742/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Completion of sewerage systems to a required standard is not a matter for my Department as it falls under Northern Ireland Water's legislation, specifically, the Water and Sewerage Service (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. It is therefore the developer's responsibility to work in conjunction with Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to ensure that required sewerage system standards are met. For that reason no enforcement action has been taken by my Department against construction companies in the last 5 years regarding this matter.

Noise Pollution

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his Department's procedures for bringing forward a prosecution for noise pollution.
(AQW 1759/09)

The Minister of the Environment: For noise pollution from domestic and commercial premises, enforcement action is taken by District Councils who have powers to deal with noise nuisance under The Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978 or the Noise Act 1996.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency regulates noise from industrial premises to which it has issued operating permits under the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

Planning Applications

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, in each of the last five years, the number

of (i) planning applications passed by councils for Management Board Referrals; (ii) the number of these rejected by the Management Board on the grounds that they were deemed to be small scale developments; and (iii) applications whose planning recommendation has been reversed.[R] (AQW 1775/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has provided the following statistics detailing in each of the last five years the numbers of (i) planning applications passed by councils for Management Board Referrals and (ii) the number of applications whose planning recommendation has been reversed. Figures are not available regarding the number of applications rejected by the Management Board on the grounds that they were deemed to be small scale. However, figures are available for applications not accepted as Management Board Referrals and are listed below.

Year	No. of Applications passed by councils for MBR's	No. of Applications whose recommendation been reversed
2007/2008	44	0
2006/2007	58	2
2005/2006	173	5
2004/2005	209	3
2003/2004	58	7

Year	No. of Applications not accepted as MBR's	% of Applications not accepted as MBR's
2007/2008	36	82%
2006/2007	54	93%
2005/2006	156	90%
2004/2005	133	64%
2003/2004	14	24%

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.

Zebra Mussels

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the situation relating to the prevalence of Zebra mussels in Lough Neagh. (AQW 1779/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Following the discovery of Zebra mussels in Lough Neagh in November 2005, Queen's University Belfast have been

studying the distribution of Zebra mussels in Lough Neagh and are reporting to the Zebra Mussel Control Group which is chaired by NIEA.

To date adult Zebra mussels have been observed on the hulls of boats removed from the water at various points around Lough Neagh. Rope spat surveys carried out around the Lough have shown that Zebra mussel veligers (larva) are widely distributed which would tend to indicate an established population of Zebra mussels in Lough Neagh.

No colonies of adult Zebra mussels have yet been observed on hard rock substrate, as was seen at Lower and Upper Lough Erne during the early phase of colonisation there.

Borough Status of Councils

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment to report on the future of the borough status of existing councils after reorganisation following the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 1784/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have previously answered this question and would refer you to my reply to Assembly Question Number AQW 1376/09.

PPS 5

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment when he expects PPS 5 to be published; and if he intends to publish it as a consultation document. (AQW 1804/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Draft PPS5 (revised) is currently the subject of legal proceedings with leave granted to Central Craigavon Limited by the Courts in April 2008 for a judicial review of the transfer of the Draft PPS from DRD to DOE. This litigation is ongoing and a hearing is scheduled for 25th November 2008.

While the judicial review is likely to cause some delay in publication I am keen to progress to the issue of the final PPS at the earliest opportunity. With this in mind my officials are continuing to take forward work on PPS5 where it is possible to do so.

Retail Impact of Food Stores

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made of the retail impact of food stores that have received planning approval from his Department; and if this impact on retail has undergone any changes over the last 3 years. (AQW 1808/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The retail impact of a food store proposal on the vitality or viability of a town centre is a material consideration for Planning Service under the Department's current policy for town centres and retail developments. That policy is contained in Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS 5): Retailing and Town Centres and draft PPS5: Retailing, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure Developments.

In accordance with PPS5, my planning officials may request that a Retail Impact Assessment (RIA) be submitted in support of any planning application for a food store. However, in the majority of cases, a RIA will only be requested where a major food store is proposed in an out of town centre location. A major food store involves the provision of over 1,000 square metres of gross retail floorspace.

The RIA provides planners with the information they require to assess whether or not a proposal is likely to have a detrimental impact on the retailing function of a town centre. The analysis of the RIA, as undertaken by planners, forms an integral part of the planning process.

There have been no changes during the last 3 years to the way that the retail impact of a food store is assessed.

Monitoring Farms

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm (i) if his Department has been monitoring farms in the Strangford constituency in the past month by helicopter and/or plane; and (ii) whether he intends to monitor every farm by this method.

(AQW 1819/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) NIEA was monitoring Areas of Special Scientific Interest by helicopter in Co Down during the week commencing 13th October 2008. Several farmland sites around Saintfield and Crossgar within in the Strangford Constituency were included in this exercise.
- (ii) Helicopter monitoring of ASSIs, first tried in 1998, is an efficient and cost effective way of checking ASSIs for damage. Most ASSIs are now monitored by this method annually. NIEA only monitors those farms designated as ASSIs by helicopter.
- (iii) I am unaware of recent aerial monitoring of farms in the Strangford Constituency by any other government Department or Agency.

Killing of the Red Kite

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department (i) has been involved in the investigation into the killing of the Red Kite in South Down; and (ii) has it had contact with the Gameskeepers Association to ascertain the facts in this matter. (AQW 1822/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Offences committed under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 are criminal offences and relevant investigations are the responsibility of the PSNI.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) works closely with the PSNI Wildlife Liaison Officer in advising on wildlife crime and has been in close contact in relation to this case.

As the investigations are being progressed by the PSNI, NIEA has not made any contact with the Gamekeepers Association in relation to this matter.

MOT Tests

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how many cars underwent MOT tests at the Newtownards Test Centre, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1863/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Detail of the number of MOT car tests carried out in each of the last five years at the Newtownards test centre is included in the following table.

Financial year	Number of car tests conducted
2003/04	49,022
2004/05	47,621
2005/06	54,487
2006/07	64,566
2007/08	63,248

Driving Tests

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how many driving tests took place at the Newtownards Test Centre, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1864/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Newtownards Test Centre conducts practical driving tests for private cars and motorcycles. Details of the number of car and motorcycle practical driving tests carried in each of the last five years at the Newtownards test centre is included in the following table.

Financial year	Number of tests conducted
2003/04	3419
2004/05	3140
2005/06	4839
2006/07	4983
2007/08	5891

Planning Refusals

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment pursuant to his answer to AQW 345/09, to provide a further breakdown detailing how many of the (i) 34 planning refusals in Londonderry/ Derry in 2006/7, were in the BT47 and BT48 areas; and (ii) how many in 2007/8 to date were in the BT47 and BT48 areas. (AQW 1875/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has provided the following statistics detailing how many commercial planning applications of the (i) 34 planning refusals in the Londonderry Division in 2006/7 were in the BT47 and BT48 areas; and (ii) how many in the 2007/8 were in the BT47 and BT48 areas.

Londonderry Division	Year 06/07	Year 07/08
Refusals in BT47 and BT48	17	20

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.

Cost of Fly-Tipping

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what the cost of fly-tipping has been, in each council area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1876/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency does not hold this information, as the responsibility for fly-tipping rests primarily with District Councils.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if the Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 will be (i) finalised; and (ii) released to the public. (AQW 1878/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department is committed to finalising a new Plan for Ards and Down by the end of March 2009, in line with our Business Plan Objective and the final Plan will be released to the public at the time of adoption.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if the implementation of the Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 will be delayed due to the requirement for PPS 14 legislation to be passed through the Assembly. (AQW 1879/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department is committed to finalising a new Plan for Ards and Down by the end of March 2009, in line with our Business Plan Objective. It is not envisaged that the implementation of the Plan will be delayed due to the requirement for PPS 14 to be passed through the Assembly.

Land Available for Housing

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total acreage of land available for housing, broken down by district council area, and how much of the land available for housing lies within 100 year flood plains. (AQW 1884/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In accordance with the plan, monitor and manage ethos of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and PPS 12 Housing in Settlements, housing developments and the residual land availability in settlements are monitored annually by Planning Service. Land available for housing includes zoned land and other land for which planning permission has been granted.

The results of the most up to date annual housing monitor survey are set out in the Northern Ireland Housing Land Availability Summary Report 2007 available from the Planning Service website at www.planningni.gov.uk. The amount of land available for housing across the 26 District Councils of Northern Ireland is 5,321 hectares (13,149 acres). The District Council breakdown is laid out in Annex 1 attached.

The Department is unable to provide information in relation to how much of the housing land available is within areas commonly referred to as 100 year flood plains. This is because the 100 year flood plain maps, while indicative of where land may flood, are not definitive and do not comprehensively cover the whole of Northern Ireland. This would make the task of trying to accurately calculate the area of housing land that lies within such flood plains impracticable and

of limited value. Even if possible any such exercise would constitute a disproportionate use of resources.

PPS15 Planning & Flood Risk lays down a precautionary approach to decision making when addressing flood risks in the preparation of development plans and the determination of planning applications. It states that development plans will not bring forward sites or zone land that may be susceptible to flooding, now or in the future, unless the most exceptional circumstances exist. Furthermore, it provides a set of land use policies to deal with the potential for flood risk where new development is proposed and places a requirement on developers to accompany planning applications with flood risk assessments in certain circumstances. Planning Service has worked closely with DARD Rivers Agency and other consultees in the preparation of development plans and the determination of planning applications and will continue to do so.

My colleague Michelle Gildernew, the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, launched the 'Strategic Flood Map (NI) Rivers and Sea' on 4th November 2008. While this will make a significant improvement and provide strategic information in relation to flooding, nevertheless, it will still be indicative of where land may flood and will not provide definitive local flood risk information. Detailed local studies would be required to determine, more accurately, the areas of land that lie within the flood plains.

Pollution Offences

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1374/09, to name the five companies that have committed repeat pollution offences; and to detail the nature of these offences.
(AQW 1928/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Some of the companies that have committed repeat pollution offences are being considered for prosecution and disclosing their identity at this stage may compromise the Department's position in such cases. The Department is taking legal advice on your request and once this legal advice has been considered, officials will write to you to advise you of the outcome.

Pollution Offences

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1383/09, to provide further details of the cases that resulted in the courts imposing one prison sentence and one suspended prison

sentence on offenders for river pollution offences.
(AQW 1929/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Both of these cases were for joint waste and water pollution offences. The case that resulted in the courts imposing a prison sentence involved an illegal landfill site which caused leachate to enter the Dunore River. The offender, Mr Samuel Wilson McIlroy, was found guilty of three offences under the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and one offence under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in Craigavon Crown Court on 4 December 2006 and was sentenced to imprisonment for 6 months.

The case that resulted in the courts imposing a suspended prison sentence also involved an illegal landfill site which caused leachate to enter the Drumragh River. The offender, Mr William Jordan, was found guilty of six offences under the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and two offences under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in Omagh Crown Court on 14 March 2007 and was sentenced to 8 months imprisonment, suspended for two years.

Glenfarm Holdings Rendering Plant

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment how many complaints against Glenfarm Holdings Rendering Plant, Glenavy, his Department has received in the last 6 months in relation to (i) pollution of local rivers; and (ii) odours emanating from the plant.
(AQW 1944/09)

The Minister of the Environment: (i) The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has investigated 6 specific complaints of water pollution relating to the Ulster Farm By-Products site in the last 6 months. The dates are as follows:

- 16 June 2008;
- 29 June 2008;
- 5 September 2008;
- 12 September 2008;
- 16 September 2008; and
- 17 September 2008.

(ii) NIEA has received 152 complaints, relating to odour in the area around Ulster Farm By-Products in the last 6 months. The monthly breakdown is tabulated below.

Month	Number of Odour Complaints
April 08	22
May 08	24
June 08	29

Month	Number of Odour Complaints
July 08	28
August 08	25
September 08	24

Rose Energy Planning Application

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment how many letters his Department has received in support of the Rose Energy planning application for Glenavy. (AQW 1947/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service has received 3661 letters in support of the Rose Energy planning application.

MOT Tests

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the latest average waiting times for an MOT test at each testing centre. (AQW 1949/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of the weekly and year to date average waiting times for a vehicle test in the 15 test centres is included in the following table.

AVERAGE WAITING TIME FOR A VEHICLE TEST IN DAYS

	Weekly	Year to date
Test Centre	19 – 25 October 2008	1 April – 25 October 2008
Armagh	9	12
Ballymena	8	18
Belfast	10	15
Coleraine	8	16
Cookstown	8	18
Craigavon	9	13
Downpatrick	8	15
Enniskillen	12	17
Larne	8	16
Lisburn	9	15
Londonderry	11	21
Mallusk	7	14
Newry	12	19
Newtownards	7	18
Omagh	11	16

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to address the rising number of motorcyclists killed in road traffic accidents. (AQW 1977/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The level of motorcyclist deaths and injuries in recent years has to be seen in the context of the increase in motorcycle use. Motorcycle registrations have increased from less than 10,000 in 1991, when there were 17 deaths, to almost 32,000 in 2007, when there were 25 deaths. Taking those two years as illustrative of the pattern, the fatality rate, relative to the number of bikes on the road, halved in that period.

However, the figures are still appalling, and there are a number of measures designed to improve road safety in this key area either already in place or on the way.

At present, my Department trains and assesses motorcycle instructors and maintains a voluntary register of those who are available to provide training commercially for new motorcyclists. The voluntary scheme is based on the mandatory compulsory basic training scheme in Great Britain but in addition Northern Ireland instructors, of whom there are currently over 70 on the register, are trained to take new motorcyclists to driving test standard and above. Surveys indicate that most new motorcyclists are trained by instructors who are on the voluntary register. To remain on the register, each instructor must be reassessed every four years and continue to meet the standard required.

On 8 December 2008 the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) will be introducing a new off-road motorcycle manoeuvres test. The new test is intended to ensure that motorcycle test candidates are competent in the control of their machines at a more demanding level than is currently the case. The aim of the test is to improve the standard of road safety for motorcycle and moped riders and ultimately all road users.

Following a public consultation the Agency is introducing compulsory basic training (CBT) for learner motorcycle riders and an approved motorcycle instructor (AMI) register.

The CBT scheme will introduce a mandatory requirement for all learner motorcycle riders to undertake a basic level of training before being permitted to ride on the public road. When a similar scheme was introduced in GB a fall was recorded in road traffic collisions involving motorcycle riders.

The mandatory AMI register will mean that only instructors who have passed the DVA assessment will be legally entitled to conduct and assess CBT and carry out all pre and post licence training for motorcyclists.

The current DOE advertising campaign for motorcyclists was launched in May 2003, and is aired three times throughout the year: at the start of the biking season in March and again in the months of May and August. The last research on this campaign, which was carried out in May 2008, showed that it was still achieving high levels of awareness and impact.

Slurry Spreading

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what advice he received from (i) Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials; and (ii) his officials, before he extended the period for slurry spreading to the end of the year. (AQO 900/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has joint responsibility with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on implementation of the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (NI) 2006. I received advice from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) which is responsible for inspection and enforcement under this legislation. Whilst this was primarily an operational matter for NIEA, they did liaise directly and agreed with DARD the approach taken.

On 2 October 2008, I clarified in a news release that the Regulations contained a transitional arrangement allowing farmers, with insufficient storage, to apply livestock manures up to 31 December 2008. However I also made it clear that from 1 January 2009 under the Regulations, all farmers must have in place sufficient storage capacity and observe the closed period. Farmers must also comply with all other measures including those relating to adverse weather conditions.

Refundable Deposit Scheme for Glass Bottles

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he has given to the introduction of a refundable deposit scheme for glass bottles, particularly beer bottles. (AQO 825/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not given any consideration to the introduction of a refundable deposit scheme for glass bottles in Northern Ireland. However, I understand that a feasibility study, organised by DEFRA, on bottle deposit charges is taking place in England and that the Scottish Government recently consulted on a possible return to the era of returnable lemonade bottles. I expect to receive details on the findings of these exercises in the near future. There may be some merit in considering a refundable deposit system for Northern Ireland, however, I would prefer to await the

findings in England and Scotland before making any commitments in relation to this matter.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a costing plan for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency for (i) 2008-09; (ii) 2009-10; and (iii) 2010-11. (AQO 880/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The budget allocated to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is set at £54.2m in 2008/09, £53.6m in 2009/10 and £52.6m 2010/11.

This funding will enable (NIEA) to meet its overall aim of protecting, conserving and promoting the national and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

NIEA is currently implementing a one year business plan which describes how it is spending its budget in 2008/09. This plan, which is available to the public and can be viewed on the NIEA website, sets out its aims, objectives and key targets, including those set by the Executive under the Programme for Government.

Work is now starting on a three year corporate and business plan for the period 2009-2012.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the statutory timetable for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and other consultees to respond to planning application consultations. (AQO 903/09)

The Minister of the Environment: At present there is no statutory requirement for any consultee to respond to a consultation on a planning application within a specified timeframe. However, Service Level Agreements are in place with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and other consultees. The target for the response to consultation requests in the Service Level Agreement is 75% within 30 working days.

Review of Public Administration

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment when he will remove his potential conflict of interest in leading the Review of Public Administration while being a council member. (AQO 837/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I would like first of all to point out that the major decisions on

the reform of local government were taken by the Executive before I was appointed as Minister for the Environment. I have already declared publicly my intention to resign as a councillor and that I will determine the timing of my resignation in consultation with party colleagues.

In the meantime, I have also confirmed publicly that I will not accept any severance payment which may be put in place for retiring councillors as a result of the Review of Public Administration. There will therefore be no question of any personal conflict of interest on my part in dealing with any proposals on severance arrangements.

Revised Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the revised Planning Policy Statement 14. (AQO 877/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I hope the Executive will consider the Revised draft PPS 14 at the earliest opportunity. If there is no agreement, I will shelve the revised draft and we will live with the existing policies.

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.

Policies in the revised draft could benefit rural communities without harming the environment.

Rights of Non-Farming Rural Dwellers

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of the Environment if he will protect the rights of non-farming rural dwellers to build homes in their rural community. (AQO 912/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I hope the Executive will consider the Revised draft PPS 14 at the earliest opportunity. If there is no agreement, I will shelve the revised draft and we will live with the existing policies.

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.

Policies in the revised draft could benefit rural communities without harming the environment.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Ards and Down Area Plan. (AQO 914/09)

The Minister of the Environment: 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 report 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. The specific content of the PAC report is confidential and can only be made available at adoption so I am unable to elaborate on these issues or recommendations at present.

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 towards the adoption of the final plan and a Paper outlining the main issues and the way forward has been approved by the Management Board.

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.

Review of Public Administration

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the potential conflict of interest that could arise as a result of his responsibility for the reform of local government and his position as a councillor. (AQO 841/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I would like first of all to point out that the major decisions on the reform of local government were taken by the Executive before I was appointed as Minister for the Environment. I have already declared publicly my intention to resign as a councillor and that I will determine the timing of my resignation in consultation with party colleagues.

In the meantime, I have also confirmed publicly that I will not accept any severance payment which may be put in place for retiring councillors as a result of the Review of Public Administration. There will therefore be no question of any personal conflict of interest on my part in dealing with any proposals on severance arrangements.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment when the Northern Ireland Environment Agency will report on the cause of the wall collapse at Antrim Castle. (AQO 911/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The wall of the Castle is scheduled for protection under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995. Under that Order, it is the responsibility of the owner, in this case Antrim Borough Council, to commission any report on the cause of the collapse. It is also their responsibility to undertake any remedial works.

Planning Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how many representations he has made to the Planning Service since he was appointed Minister of the Environment; and what advice he has received from Departmental officials in relation to potential conflicts of interest. (AQO 910/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since I was appointed as Minister of the Environment I have made 71 representations to the Planning Service.

I am fully entitled to make representations about planning applications, provided there is no potential for conflict of interest. Such representations are treated in the same way as those from any other elected representative. A conflict of interest would only arise where I am involved in the final decision making process on an application and any such conflict will be avoided.

Local Government Employee Retirement Age

Lord Browne asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to remove the default age of retirement at 65 for local government employees. (AQO 867/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Section 44 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 which set the default age of retirement for local government employees at 65 was repealed by The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (SR 2006 No. 261) which came into operation on 1 October 2006.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in relation to the

appointment of a Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQO 823/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The necessary papers defining the job specification and setting out experience and skills required of a successful applicant are in the process of completion. Public advertisement of the post will follow soon.

Local Government Boundaries Commissioner

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment if the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner can make significant change to local government boundaries during his review. (AQO 862/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner has been tasked with making recommendations on the boundaries of the eleven new local government districts and the wards that constitute those districts.

The very nature of his task in reducing from 26 the number of districts means that the existing boundaries will be changed significantly.

The Local Government (Boundaries) Act 2008 specifies, as the starting point for the Commissioner's review, the broad boundaries of the new districts by reference to the current local government districts.

The new districts must incorporate the whole or "major part" of the current districts, as set out in the Boundaries Act. The implication is that a minor part – which to my mind could still be a significant part – could, if necessary, be included in a different district from that envisaged by the Act.

It is for the Commissioner to decide what changes are appropriate - significant or otherwise - to the current district and ward boundaries, in line with the rules set in Schedule 4 to the Local Government Act (NI) 1972, as amended.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Office Headquarters and Dependent Offices

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time staff, that are employed or proposed to be employed in the office headquarters and dependent offices of (a) the Charities Commission; (b) the Victims and Survivors Commission; (c) the

Regional Health and Social Care Board; (d) the Common Services Organisation; (e) Northern Ireland Civil Service Shared Services; (f) Local Government Shared Services; (g) the Education and Skills Authority; (h) the Northern Ireland Library Board; (i) Land and Property Services; (j) the Northern Ireland Environment Agency; (k) Northern Ireland Water; and (l) the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. (AQW 1251/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): Details of the number of staff employed or proposed to be employed in the specified office headquarters and dependent offices are set out in the attached table.

	Currently Employed		Proposed to be Employed	
	(i) Full-time	(ii) Part-time	(i) Full-time	(ii) Part-time
(a) Charities Commission	-	-	16	-
(b) Victims and Survivors Commission	7	-	(1)	(1)
(c) Regional Health and Social Care Board	-	-	Less than 400 (2)	-
(d) Regional Support Services Organisation ⁽³⁾	-	-	Less than 950 (2)	-
(e) Northern Ireland Civil Service Shared Services	-	-	(1)	(1)
(f) Local Government Shared Services	-	-	(1)	(1)
(g) Education and Skills Authority	-	-	(1)	(1)
(h) Northern Ireland Library Board	-	-	35 ⁽²⁾	-
(i) Land and Property Services	768	103	-	-
(j) Northern Ireland Environment Agency	-	-	807	26
(k) Northern Ireland Water	1,720 ⁽⁴⁾	-	-	-

	Currently Employed		Proposed to be Employed	
	(i) Full-time	(ii) Part-time	(i) Full-time	(ii) Part-time
(l) Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	2,761	377	-	-

(1) Information not available.

(2) Estimated figure and it has not possible to provide a breakdown of full-time/part-time posts.

(3) Previously referred to as the Common Services Organisation.

(4) It has not been possible to provide a breakdown of full-time/part-time posts.

Departmental Private Office

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff are employed in his Departmental private office; and the annual cost of employing these staff. (AQW 1341/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are seven (7) staff in DFP Private Office. The annual costs of employing the staff during the financial years 2007/08 and 2008/09 to date (1 April to 30 September) are:

2007/08	£149,127.60
2008/09 to date	£69,701.70

These figures exclude the Minister's Special Adviser.

Government Funded Agencies

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many (i) civil servants; and (ii) senior staff, employed by government funded agencies, are paid more than the post for First Minister. (AQW 1460/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are 4 civil servants who are paid more than the post for First Minister.

There are no senior staff in government funded agencies who are paid more than the post of First Minister. This answer excludes public bodies as they are not agencies of the Northern Ireland Departments.

Departmental Assets

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has plans to raise revenue by selling Departmental assets. (AQW 1537/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As set out in the Budget 2008-2011 document, Northern Ireland departments have plans in place to generate £486 million of capital receipts in the current financial year with a further £60 million coming from the work of the Capital Realisation Taskforce (CRT).

Primary responsibility for any decisions regarding the sale of assets lies with individual departments. As regards my own department, I have currently no plans to raise further revenue from the sale of assets in 2008-09, beyond those set out in the Budget document.

Construction Industry

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the current economic pressures on the construction industry. (AQW 1619/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Government recognises and shares the concerns of the construction industry, particularly in relation to the downturn in the housing sector. I have recently met with a wide range of representatives of the industry to discuss their concerns and ideas at first hand. The First and deputy First Ministers and the Committee for Finance and Personnel have also held similar meetings.

The Programme for Government and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) will result in up to £20bn being invested by 2018. This is a key instrument and opportunity to mitigate the effects of the economic downturn particularly within the construction industry.

Government is fully committed to the delivery of ISNI. The Strategic Investment Board Ltd, with input from the Central Procurement Directorate in my Department, are introducing a new Delivery Tracking System to facilitate up-to-date monitoring of Departments' progress in delivering major projects and programmes.

Small Business Rates Relief Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on proposals for a Small Business Rates Relief Scheme. (AQW 1625/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As you know, the Economic Research Institute for Northern Ireland (ERINI), was commissioned to carry out a study into the case for a small business rate relief scheme, in 2007. Its report, published in March 2008, concluded that there was not a strong economic case for the introduction of such a scheme. It added, however, that if it were decided to introduce a rate relief scheme for small businesses, a targeted one based on wider social grounds would be worth examining.

You will also be aware that the DFP Committee, while accepting the main recommendation of the report that a broad scheme could not be justified, put forward several options for a more targeted scheme.

My officials have carried out a further assessment of the likely impact and effectiveness of these alternative options. I am currently considering their recommendations and the further evidence presented and hope to make an announcement on a way forward very shortly.

Gross Value Added Figures

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the most recent Gross Value Added (GVA) figures are and; how this compares with other UK regions. (AQW 1629/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The latest Gross Value Added (GVA) figures available (2006)¹ show that Northern Ireland's GVA stands at £26.43 billion, which equates to £15,175 per capita. This per capita figure is equivalent to 81.5% of the UK average and places Northern Ireland joint second bottom (with the North East) of the 12 UK regions, and marginally above Wales (77%).

Gross Value Added Gap

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the pre-devolution target was for closing the Gross Value Added (GVA) gap. (AQW 1630/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The previous Direct Rule Government did not have a specific target for closing the GVA per capita gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

However, the previous draft Regional Economic Strategy (reflecting the limited aspirations of the Direct Rule Government) included analysis which predicted that GVA per head in Northern Ireland, relative to the UK average, would increase from 80 percent in 2002 to 80.5 percent in 2015.

Land and Property Services

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the average time for new properties to be placed on the rateable list, by Land and Property Services. (AQW 1654/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The average time for new properties to be placed in the Valuation List by Land and Properties Services since 1st April 2006 was 126 days.

For domestic properties only, it was 129 days on average while for non-domestic properties only it was 97 days.

There is no appreciable loss of revenue by any delayed valuations within the life of a Valuation List as, the date of valuation does not restrict the commencement date for billing purposes.

Budget Stocktake Exercise

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the potential of the current Budget Stocktake exercise to reallocate spending, beyond the scope of the current quarterly monitoring rounds. (AQW 1660/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The normal quarterly monitoring round process provides the opportunity for the Executive to reallocate resources within each financial year.

In March 2008 the Executive agreed to conduct a Strategic Stocktake rather than engage in a full Budget exercise.

As I informed the Assembly on 14 October 2008, the objective of the Strategic Stocktake is to review progress to date and allow departments register any significant pressures or easements that they are aware of for 2009-10 and 2010-11. The focus is on surveying the landscape at this early stage, rather than waiting until we are already into the next financial year.

In this way, we can determine our strategic approach now to managing any pressures through the in-year monitoring processes, although the key principle remains that it is only possible for the Executive to make additional allocations through a corresponding reduction in the funding for other business areas.

Civil Service and Water Charges

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the proposals he discussed with the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, in the week ending 11 October 2008, about (i) the Civil Service equal pay claim: and (ii) the deferral of water charges. (AQW 1677/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 8 October to discuss how both the burden of the one-off cost associated with the Civil Service equal-pay claim and the issues linked to the financing of the introduction of water charges could be handled with the least possible impact on the delivery of local public services. A range of proposals were discussed,

including gaining early access to end year flexibility and the use of capital to help address the Equal Pay issue, but as discussions are still ongoing it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

Sale of Surplus Assets

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel further to his statement to the Assembly on the June monitoring round, to detail the figure for capital receipts from the sale of surplus assets, particularly house sales. (AQW 1678/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The generation of additional revenue from the sale of surplus assets is not separately identified from other capital receipts in the monitoring of expenditure by Northern Ireland departments.

The September monitoring return from the Department for Social Development projected a £67.4 million shortfall in terms of land and house sales. However, pro-active management action by the department has resulted in the net pressure being reduced to £51.9 million.

Strategic Stocktake

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what issues are being considered as part of the 'strategic stocktake' the Executive is due to undertake in relation to the Budget and Programme for Government. (AQW 1679/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Strategic Stocktake of the Executive's expenditure plans for 2009-10 and 2010-11 will involve a review of progress against plans and any increases or decreases in requirements. The key issues that will be considered as part of the exercise include the approach to the NICS Equal Pay Claim, the future funding arrangements for water and sewerage services and the impact of the downturn in the property market on planned capital receipts.

It is also expected that departments will raise a number of additional issues in their submissions to DFP.

Budgetary Receipts

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give the overall percentage change in budgetary receipts as an outcome of the fall in property prices. (AQW 1680/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The difference between the actual level of capital receipts generated by departments and those planned in the

Budget process is the result of a range of factors. Although the fall in property prices is important, the more constrained position in terms of the credit market has also had a significant impact. In addition, departments would be expected to take remedial action to offset any shortfall in planned capital receipts.

Therefore, it is not possible to provide a figure for the percentage change in budgetary receipts as an outcome of the fall in property prices with an acceptable degree of accuracy.

Strategic Stocktake

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for his assessment of the ability of a 'strategic stocktake' to deal with large shifts and displacements in the Budget; and (ii) what consideration he has given to bringing his proposed adjustments to the Assembly. (AQW 1682/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The strategic stocktake exercise provides the opportunity for the Executive to consider the emerging pressures and easements identified by departments since the Executive's spending plans for 2009-10 and 2010-11 were approved by the Assembly in January 2008. The purpose of the exercise will be to inform decisions by the Executive regarding how best to deal with issues arising.

As I explained to the Assembly on 14 October, the focus is on surveying the landscape at this early stage and in determining our strategic approach to managing any pressures through the in-year monitoring processes. It is at that point that the Assembly would be notified of any adjustments.

Rates Arrears

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps the Minister has taken to rectify rates arrears, with over £130 million outstanding. (AQW 1683/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services resolutely and consistently pursues all ratepayers who have not discharged their rate liability, with some 80 staff working on a full-time basis on the various stages of rate recovery.

The first stage in the rate recovery cycle is to issue final notices for those ratepayers who fail to discharge their debt or to make a mutually agreeable repayment plan after having received a final notice. The next stage is to instigate court proceedings. Should the debt still remain unpaid following the award of a decree in the Magistrates Court, then further legal action is taken, which results in the case being referred to

the Enforcement of Judgements Office (who will attempt to secure payment through, for example, an attachment of earnings order or an order charging land). Alternatively, the debt could be referred to the Crown Solicitors Office to instigate bankruptcy or liquidation proceedings.

So far during 2008/2009, Land and Property Services has issued 97,669 final payment notices and 26,769 court proceedings. The Magistrates Courts have awarded 6,514 decrees for rating debt.

Since 31 March 2008 the successful implementation of our arrears strategy has reduced the level of debt owing (£123.8m) to around £70m.

Devolution of Policing and Justice

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on discussions with the UK Treasury on the financial settlement for the devolution of policing and justice, including: (i) the determination of new baselines for the Northern Ireland Block Grant and; (ii) the revision of the Barnett Formula. (AQW 1689/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are no discussions with the Treasury on a financial settlement for the devolution of policing and justice since political agreement has not been reached on this issue. It is clear that funding issues will play a key part in any future discussions.

Rates Collection

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the basis of the 15% rise in the cost of rates collection charged to District Councils, considering the shortfall in funding for the agency during the current Budgetary cycle.[R] (AQW 1708/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Agency estimates the cost of rates collection will increase by 15% by 2009/10 compared with 2007/08 to meet additional costs of implementing new rating reforms e.g. extra staff, continued investment to develop IT systems.

Introduction of £400 Cap

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the timescale for a decision on the introduction of a £400k cap in [the timetable for the setting of] the district rate to be struck by Councils for 2009/10.[R] (AQW 1711/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Consultation was undertaken earlier this year on a

proposal to reduce the maximum capital value. This included details on the results of the initial integrated impact assessment that had been carried out in relation to this change. Having taken account of the responses to this consultation and the analysis, I intend to reduce the maximum capital value to £400,000 from April 2009. This has been announced well in advance of councils striking their rates, for 2009/10, by 15 February 2009.

Introduction of £400 Cap

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on contingencies that may be put in place to assist Councils if a decision to introduce a £400k cap for the 2009/10 financial year is made after Councils strike their district rate.[R] (AQW 1713/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No contingencies are needed given that I have already announced my decision to reduce the maximum capital value to £400,000 from April 2009. This is well in advance of when district councils strike their rate for 2009/10, subject to Executive sign off on the Rates (Amendment) Bill. I will also be asking the Assembly to approve legislation that will allow compensating payments to be made to district councils in 2009/10 and 2010/11 for any loss in district rate revenue sustained as a result of reducing the cap from £500,000 to £400,000. This will be set at 100% in 2009/10 and 50% in 2010/11.

Introduction of £400 Cap

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of a £400k cap in the estimated Penny Product figures for the 2009/10 financial year that are being provided to Councils.[R] (AQW 1714/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Estimated Penny Product (EPP) provided to District Councils for the 2009-2010 year will not take account of the reduction in the cap from £500,000 to £400,000. The approach being taken in the EPP is that there will be no loss in revenue to Councils with the cap reduced to £400K. Councils will therefore strike their rate without any adjustment for the revised cap. It is intended that this will be paid in-year, by the Department of Finance and Personnel, on this basis.

At finalisation stage the reduction in cap from £500,000 to £400,000 will be considered a loss in income revenue to District Councils. The compensating payments to councils would be paid along side this.

Subject to Executive sign off on the Rates (Amendment) Bill, I will be asking the Assembly

to approve legislation that will allow compensating payments to be provided to District Councils for the years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. This will consist of 100% relief in 2009-2010 and 50% in the following year.

Investment Strategy

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the roll-out of the Investment Strategy over the next 3 years. (AQW 1793/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The latest forecasts provided by Departments indicate that gross spend in taking forward the Investment Strategy will exceed £1.6 billion in 2008-09.

In relation to 2009-10 and 2010-11, the current Strategic Stocktake exercise provides the opportunity for the Executive to consider a strategic approach to any emerging pressures and easements identified by Departments for those years.

Cost of Flights

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of return flights taken by civil servants from (a) Belfast International Airport; and (b) George Best Belfast City Airport; and (ii) the total costs of these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1810/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the attached table.

The information provided covers the full years from 2004 to 2007 and part information for 2008. The Northern Ireland Civil Service Travel Management Company, Carlson Wagonlit Travel, has provided this information. However, any flights booked outside of the Travel Management contract are not included.

NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE

2008 Jan - Sep	Total Costs (excl. Tax)	No of Flights
Belfast City Apt	£883,436	4,911
Belfast International Apt	£181,143	1,524
2007 Jan - Dec	Total Cost (excl. Tax)	No of Flights
Belfast City Apt	£1,218,030	6,831
Belfast International Apt	£240,519	2,225
2006 Jan - Dec	Total Costs (excl. Tax)	No of Flights
Belfast City Apt	£1,324,908	7,132

2008 Jan - Sep	Total Costs (excl. Tax)	No of Flights
Belfast International Apt	£176,355	1,672
2005 Jan - Dec	Total Costs (excl. Tax)	No of Flights
Belfast City Apt	£1,615,509	8,053
Belfast International Apt	£108,961	927
2004 Oct - Dec	Total Costs (excl. Tax)	No of Flights
Belfast City Apt	£406,787	2,035
Belfast International Apt	£5,332	77

Cost of Flights

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of flights taken by civil servants; (ii) the total costs; and (iii) the average cost of a flight between (a) Belfast International Airport; and (b) George Best Belfast City Airport and all London airports. (AQW 1811/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the attached table.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service Travel Management Company, Carlson Wagonlit Travel, has provided this information. However, any flights booked outside of the Travel Management contract are not included. Information covering five years is not available. I have therefore provided information held from 2004 to 2008 to date.

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2008 Jan - Sep			
Belfast To London	4,128	617,885	150
(a) Belfast International	717	34,968	49
London Gatwick	296	14,442	49
London Heathrow	217	12,636	58
London Luton	103	3,851	37
London Stanstead	101	4,039	40
(b) Belfast City	3,411	582,918	171
London City	27	4,370	162
London Gatwick	634	56,335	89
London Heathrow	2,584	514,503	199

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2008 Jan - Sep			
London Stanstead	166	7,710	46

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2007			
Belfast London	5,696	888,693	156
(a) Belfast International	770	42,944	56
London Gatwick	386	23,207	60
London Heathrow	0	0	0
London Luton	148	7,008	47
London Stanstead	236	12,729	54
(b) Belfast City	4,926	845,748	172
London City	22	4,539	206
London Gatwick	855	100,657	118
London Heathrow	3,973	736,979	185
London Stanstead	76	3,573	47

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2006			
Belfast London	6,147	1,031,714	168
(a) Belfast International	645	45,634	71
London Gatwick	305	24,524	80
London Heathrow	1	127	127
London Luton	131	8,374	64
London Stanstead	208	12,609	61
(b) Belfast City	5,502	986,079	179
London City	0	0	0
London Gatwick	969	143,197	148
London Heathrow	4512	841,556	187
London Stanstead	21	1,326	63

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2005			
Belfast London	6,226	1,129,904	181
(a) Belfast International	313	24,935	80
London Gatwick	139	12,132	87
London Heathrow	0	0	0
London Luton	71	4,644	65
London Stanstead	103	8,159	79
(b) Belfast City	5,913	1,104,969	187
London City	0	0	0
London Gatwick	745	125,286	168
London Heathrow	5,168	979,683	190
London Stanstead	0	0	0

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2004			
Belfast London	1,602	311,225	194
(a) Belfast International	21	1,251	60
London Gatwick	8	455	57
London Heathrow	0	0	0

	(a) AER LINGUS			(b) EASYJET		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax	Average Ticket Price	Trips	Spend Ex tax	Average Ticket Price
BELFAST INTERNATIONAL	217	£12636	£58	500	£22,332	£45
London Gatwick	0	0	0	296	£14,442	£49
London Heathrow	217	£12,636	£58	0	0	0
London Luton	0	0	0	103	£3,851	£37
London Stanstead	0	0	0	101	£4,039	£40

	All Ticketed Airlines		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax £	Average Ticket Price £
2004			
London Luton	11	677	62
London Stanstead	2	119	60
(b) Belfast City	1,581	309,974	196
London City	9	1,881	209
London Gatwick	207	30,858	149
London Heathrow	1,364	277,033	203
London Stanstead	1	202	202

Cost of Flights

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to flights taken by civil servants between Belfast International Airport and London airports, to detail (i) the number of flights; (ii) total costs of flights; and (iii) average costs, using (a) Aer Lingus; and (b) Easyjet; since 14 January 2008.

(AQW 1817/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the attached table.

The information provided covers the period from the 14th January 2008 to date. The Northern Ireland Civil Service Travel Management Company, Carlson Wagonlit Travel, has provided this information. However, any flights booked outside of the Travel Management contract are not included.

Cost of Flights

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to flights taken by civil servants between George Best Belfast City Airport and London airports, to detail (i) the number of flights; (ii) total costs of flights; and (iii) average costs, using (a) BMI; and (b) Flybe; since 14 January 2008. (AQW 1818/09)

	FLYBE			BRITISH MIDLAND		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
	Trips	Spend Ex tax	Average Ticket Price	Trips	Spend Ex tax	Average Ticket Price
GEORGE BEST BELFAST CITY	633	£56,258	£89	2,584	£514,503	£199
London City	0	0	0	0	0	0
London Gatwick	633	£56,258	£89	0	0	0
London Heathrow	0	0	0	2,584	£514,503	£199
London Stanstead	0	0	0	0	0	0

Vacant Properties

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assistance his Department is giving to North Down Borough council in the collation of vacant properties in that area. (AQW 1859/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services is currently working closely with all 26 councils to validate the status of properties recorded on the rating database as vacant. North Down Borough Council is acting as Land and Property Services' agent and is being paid for its data validation work by Land and Property Services. This exercise, which will be completed in the coming weeks, will improve the accuracy of the rates database.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given that the 20 October 2008 deadline has passed without the implementation of the Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers scheme, what action he is taking to ensure that this scheme is delivered. (AQW 1899/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The implementation of this scheme will take place following the introduction of the new civil service payroll system. This is a very ambitious and complex project and all elements are being fully tested to ensure that they are fit for purpose. The situation was reviewed on 20 October but, while good progress had been made against the predefined success criteria, it was concluded that it would not be possible to

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the attached table.

The information provided covers the period from the 14th January 2008 to date. The Northern Ireland Civil Service Travel Management Company, Carlson Wagonlit Travel, has provided this information. However, any flights booked outside of the Travel Management contract are not included.

implement the new payroll system and consequently the Salary Sacrifice Childcare Voucher scheme by the October pay date.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers scheme given that the deadline of 20 October 2008 has passed. (AQW 1900/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The implementation of this scheme will take place following the introduction of the new civil service payroll system. This is a very ambitious and complex project and all elements are being fully tested to ensure that they are fit for purpose. The situation was reviewed on 20 October but, while good progress had been made against the predefined success criteria, it was concluded that it would not be possible to implement the new payroll system and consequently the Salary Sacrifice Childcare Voucher scheme by the October pay date.

Civil Service Jobs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of civil service jobs in the (i) Carrickfergus; (ii) Larne; and (iii) Newtownabbey Borough Council areas, broken down by office location. (AQW 1913/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of staff in post in the three district council areas, broken down by office location, is detailed in the attached table.

District Council	Department	Building Address			Staff
Carrickfergus	DEL	Govt. Office	Davy Street	Carrickfergus BT38 8BN	30
Carrickfergus	DSD	Govt. Office	Davy Street	Carrickfergus BT38 8BN	24
Carrickfergus	DOE	Carrickfergus Castle	Belfast Road	Carrickfergus	3
Carrickfergus	DRD	Victoria Street	Carrickfergus	BT38 8AQ	12
Carrickfergus	DOE	Marine Highway	Carrickfergus	BT38 7BG	2
Total Carrickfergus					71
Larne	DARD	Crown Bldgs	Pound Street	Larne BT40 1SH	43
Larne	DSD	Crown Bldgs	Pound Street	Larne BT40 1SH	36
Larne	DOE	Ballyboley Road	Balloran	Larne BT40 2SY	21
Larne	DEL	59 Pound Street	Larne	BT40 1SB	23
Larne	DRD	81 Belfast Road	Larne		13
Total Larne					136
Newtownabbey	DRD	Sandyknowes Depot	543 Antrim Road	BT36 8RF	37
Newtownabbey	DOE	Hydepark Industrial Est	Commercial Way	Mallusk Newtownabbey	31
Newtownabbey	DSD	Crown Bldgs	39 Church Road	Newtownabbey BT36 7RA	47
Newtownabbey	DEL	Govt. Office	41 Church Road	Newtownabbey BT36 7RA	34
Total Newtownabbey					149
TOTAL					356

Notes

Data source as at 1 January 2008.

Figures do not include those on career break.

Figures include both permanent and casual staff.

Events on the Stormont Estate

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline how events on the Stormont Estate are managed and approved. (AQW 1963/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

My Department is responsible for managing and approving events held within the Stormont Estate, except in those areas held under licence by the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association, which are the responsibility of the licensees.

DFP approved events are managed in line with the Event Safety Guide published by the Health and Safety Executive. Events are managed to minimise disruption

to local residents, promote public safety and to ensure that there is no cost or liability to the Department.

Whenever a request to hold an event within the Stormont Estate is received, my officials meet with the organisers, representatives of the 'blue light' services and local residents groups (if they are interested) to ascertain the viability and suitability of the event for the estate.

Once I have considered my officials' advice, I will then take a decision to either give approval or to refuse permission.

Sufferers of Pleural Plaques

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work of his officials examining the House of Lords ruling on compensation for sufferers of pleural plaques; and to detail a timeframe within which he will make a decision on whether compensation will be made available.

(AQW 2037/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My Department is continuing to explore the most appropriate way of supporting people diagnosed with pleural plaques and, on 13 October, it published a consultation paper which set out a number of issues for consideration. The consultation exercise will close on 12 January 2009 and, as is customary, officials will then prepare a summary of the responses received and make recommendations on the way forward. At this stage, it is not possible to say when that summary will be completed, as much will depend on the number of responses submitted. I am, however, conscious of the concerns which have arisen in light of the House of Lords' decision and it will be my aim to place proposals on future action before Executive colleagues at the earliest possible opportunity.

Integrated Supply Team Framework Agreement

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many projects have been procured through the Integrated Supply Team Framework Agreement, detailing (i) the name and value of each project; and (ii) the projected value of the Framework, including forthcoming projects.

(AQW 2042/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No projects have been procured through the current Integrated Supply Team framework agreement and as a result of a legal challenge the High Court has ruled that the current framework agreement be set aside. The projected value of contracts to be awarded through the current framework agreement, over its four-year period, would have been dependent on the level of usage by the public sector up to the declared maximum value of £500m to £800m.

National Fraud Initiative

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what sets of data it supplied to the Comptroller and Auditor General under the national fraud initiative.

(AQO 827/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The data sets supplied by DFP were:

- Payroll - industrial and non-industrial pay for all bodies within the Northern Ireland Audit Office scope;
- Trade creditors payment history for the period 3 December 2007 to 6 October 2008;
- Trade creditors standing data as at 6 October 2008;
- Pensions – payroll pensions and deferred pensions; and
- Housing benefit awards as at 3 October 2008.

The following data set is to be supplied by DFP:

- Rateable properties and occupants – to be provided prior to January 2009 for pilot reconciliation against electoral register and DETI data.

Impact of the Banking Crisis

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact of the banking crisis on the economy.

(AQO 833/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

Hopefully the state of crisis and turmoil within the national and international banking industry has abated. There will undoubtedly be negative consequences for the UK economy, particularly through job losses in financial services and the construction industry.

The Northern Ireland economy however should be relatively insulated. I say this because we have significantly less reliance on the financial services sector. However, our construction sector may be adversely affected in the short term, particularly in the domestic housing sector.

The influence of the public sector within Northern Ireland economy should also ensure that there remains some buoyancy in terms of economic activity relative to other regions of the UK.

Ulster Savings Certificates

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to the reintroduction of Ulster Savings Certificates, given the current financial climate.

(AQO 811/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Ulster Savings Scheme was closed to reinvestments from 31 March 1997. This decision was based on declining interest in the scheme which reflected the fact that other investment opportunities provided by National Savings and commercial banks were able to offer preferential rates. This remains the case and I therefore have no plans to reintroduce a scheme such as Ulster Savings at this time.

European Union

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what proportion of the budget is derived from European Union sources. (AQO 810/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Funding from the European Union continues to make a significant contribution to the expenditure of Northern Ireland departments. In the financial year 2008-2009 £327 million of funding for local departments is planned to come from European Union sources, which is equivalent to 3.4% of planned expenditure as set out in the Budget 2008-2011 document.

Issue of Birth Certificates

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to increase registration checks for the issue of birth certificates. (AQO 814/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Registrar General is statutorily required to furnish any person with a certified copy of a birth entry (known as a birth certificate). Birth certificates are public documents (although individuals must state their reason when applying for a certificate) and it is clearly indicated on the document that they do not constitute proof of identity of the persons presenting them. The Civil Registration Bill (Northern Ireland) 2008, currently progressing through the Assembly, will enable the General Register Office to notify birth certificate information (as well as deaths, marriages and civil partnership information) directly to central and local government departments and approved third parties to assist them in the discharge of their functions.

In time this should serve to reduce the need for the issue of certified copies.

Postponement of Monitoring Round

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the implications of the postponement of the October monitoring round. (AQO 858/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The September Monitoring Round was not postponed. Monitoring returns were received from departments, a draft Executive Paper was produced with comments received from my Ministerial colleagues. The only delay has been in terms of formal Executive approval for my recommendations, which I am now seeking under Urgent Procedure.

Approval under Urgent Procedure was required because a delay in the confirmation of the outcome of

any monitoring round will significantly constrain the ability of departments to either fully utilise additional

allocations or to put in place contingency plans in respect of the spending bids not recommended in light of the broader financial context.

Public-Sector Procurement Contracts

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what percentage of public-sector procurement contracts awarded in 2007/08 included social clauses. (AQO 889/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In line with Public Procurement Policy all contracts awarded by public bodies in Northern Ireland have social clauses relating to equality of opportunity and health and safety considerations.

During the period 2007/2008, forty nine contracts were awarded which included additional social clauses relating to skills development and site safety in the construction industry; use of fair trade products and development of essential skills in the workforce. This figure equates to 1.7% of the total contracts awarded during that period.

Public-Sector Pay Demands

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on budgetary pressures arising from public-sector pay demands. (AQO 886/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: On behalf of the Executive, I have responsibility for approving all public-sector pay awards. Public-sector pay accounts for approximately half of Northern Ireland's current expenditure so it's important to control pay growth. Any additional budgetary pressures arising from public-sector pay demands, such as equal pay, will have to be dealt with by allocating and prioritising public expenditure through the budgetary process.

Vacant Properties

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many councils have miscalculated their estimated income due to vacant properties. (AQO 931/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand that this question relates to 2007/2008 financial year.

Vacant domestic properties, and some vacant non-domestic properties, result in a loss of revenue

to district councils. In December 2006 councils were provided with an Estimated Penny Product to assist in the striking of their district rates for 2007/2008. A forecast of vacancy losses was included. However, the outturn revenue losses from vacancies were higher than was forecast.

It is not only vacant property that contributes to losses in revenue for councils, as changes to the tax base, such as the demolition of properties and reductions in the rateable values of properties, also affect the overall losses on the income received by councils.

In this context seven councils received less rate revenue income than expected due to the losses being higher than forecast.

Regional and District Rate

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to revise the regional and district rate, to provide incentives to the business sector given the present economic downturn.

(AQO 812/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The current uncertain economic climate coupled with the volatility in financial markets will clearly be of great concern to many of our local businesses.

First of all we need to remind ourselves that there is a limit to what the rating system can afford and deliver in terms of providing incentives to the business sector, even during the present economic downturn. There are plenty of other ways of delivering support than through the rating system. Responsibility for supporting our business sector lies with all Ministers which is why the Executive has made the achievement of a dynamic, innovative local economy a key priority in the Programme for Government.

Having said that, this Department has already taken a number of steps which will help the business sector during this time.

The district rate is of course the responsibility of each of the 26 district councils and the Department therefore has no authority over it.

As the Member may know, however, at the last Budget, it was announced that the non domestic regional rate will not increase in real terms over the CSR period. This is already bringing benefits for local businesses and will also provide more certainty with regard to these costs as they plan ahead.

In addition to this, industrial rates have been frozen at 30%, which is of particular benefit to our vital manufacturing sector. This will save around £12.5m in costs for manufacturing firms this year alone.

A report was also commissioned by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland which looked at the case for a rate relief scheme for small businesses. This concluded that a broadly based scheme was unlikely to be effective in supporting small businesses and the DFP Committee agreed with that assessment.

I am currently considering proposals for a targeted scheme aimed at one particularly vulnerable sector which provides essential services to our community. I need to be satisfied that it is necessary, effective and affordable before I bring this matter to the Assembly but I hope to do so shortly. There are no quick fixes, however and any new relief scheme requires new legislation, which would take over a year to work through.

I think that these represent balanced, sensible measures which will benefit a wide range of businesses in different sectors and will be particularly welcome during this time of economic uncertainty.

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to implement all of the recommendations in the Bain Report on the Location of Public-sector Jobs.

(AQO 929/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The report which was published by Professor Bain on 30 September is the result of an independent review. The recommendations have to be carefully considered by government before decisions on a way forward can be reached. As a first step I have written to Executive colleagues to gather opinions from Ministers and these, together with the views of the Finance Committee and the Assembly debate on 21 October, will be useful in assessing the degree of consensus on the proposals that have been put forward.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Locum Consultants

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) highest hourly rate paid to a locum consultant in surgery; and (ii) average hourly rate paid to locum consultants in surgery, in each hospital, for each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1464/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): Not all Trusts were able to confirm the average hourly rates for the past three years due to the disproportionate cost of

retrieving the information. However, the information received indicates that the average hourly rate in 2007/8 was £61.90 and highest hourly rate for the same period was £64.47.

Locally Qualified Personnel

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the number of locally qualified personnel entering the Health Service, as a percentage of total recruitment, for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1467/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not held centrally.

Health Provisions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a breakdown of all new health provisions he has announced since taking office. (AQW 1468/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Among the new health provisions I have announced since I took this post are:

- New south west hospital in Enniskillen
- Enhanced local hospital in Omagh
- Health & Social Care Centres in Andersonstown and Shankill
- Review of junior doctor training and recruitment
- New technology to support independent living
- Orthopaedic Integrated Assessment and Treatment Services
- Zero Tolerance Campaign on attacks against staff
- Funding for children with complex needs
- Funding to improve inadequate respite services
- Award of full nurses' pay rise
- Further protection for vulnerable adults
- £50m capital investment across the South Eastern Trust area
- CT scanner at Lagan Valley Hospital
- New screening programme to prevent blindness among people with diabetes
- Independent review of autism
- Maternity allowance for student nurses and midwives
- £4.4m investment in health service dentistry
- Deliberate Self-Harm Registry pilot scheme in the Western Health & Social Services Board area
- All-island mental health promotion campaign
- £15.2m capital investment for Craigavon Hospital
- New maternity unit at Ulster Hospital
- Mental Health & Learning Disability Nursing recruitment campaign
- Nursing care standards for patient food in hospital
- £16m Health & Social Care Centre in Portadown
- Hospital visiting policy
- Location of £2m centre for rape and sexual assault victims
- Improved recruitment to medical training
- Independent review of Omagh house fire tragedy
- Strategy to promote equality and human rights in the health service
- European Centre of Excellence for health care technology
- £46m investment in chronic conditions
- £5m centre of excellence for research into complex public health issues
- Primary Care diabetes service
- New Standards for care homes
- £9m investment in clean and safer care
- Single rooms in new hospitals in Northern Ireland
- Regional suicide prevention hot line
- New Dunmurry Fire Station
- Independent Review of C Difficile outbreak in Northern Trust area
- £1.4m funding for day care centre for the elderly in Ballybeen
- Specialist fracture service at Craigavon Hospital
- £6m for prisoner healthcare transfer
- Emergency care project for patients attending A&E and out of hours services
- Investment to improve emergency response times in south west
- New satellite radiotherapy centre for Altnagelvin
- Child care allowance for student nurses
- Community midwife unit at new Downe Hospital
- New Regional Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre at NI Ambulance Service
- Free car parking for the very ill and their families at hospitals across N.Ireland
- £14m investment in stroke services
- Properties for Women's Aid Londonderry
- New fire appliances for north west
- Five year regional strategy for tackling sexual violence and abuse in N.Ireland
- £12m investment in better services for heart disease
- £2.6m cardiac catheterisation laboratory at Craigavon Hospital

- £190m capital investment at Ulster Hospital
- Development of action plan for autism services
- Agenda for Change rates of pay achieved
- Legal age of sale of tobacco products increased to 18
- £8m to Trusts to help them cope with increased energy costs
- 24/7 nursing cover for Rathlin Island
- Cervical cancer vaccination programme
- £3.5m investment in maternity services in Craigavon
- Additional investment in student midwives in Southern Trust area
- Abolition of prescription charges
- £17m capital investment in ambulance fleet
- Public Inquiry on C Difficile outbreak
- Review of maternity services in Belfast Trust area
- Opening of Carlisle Health and Care Centre
- £26m capital investment in the Fire & Rescue Service

Trained Nurses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses have been trained, over the last 3 years. (AQW 1471/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The numbers of commissioned pre-registration nurses trained in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years are as follows:

Academic year 2007-2008	730
Academic year 2006-2007	730
Academic Year 2005-2006	730

Trained Nurses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses are to be trained, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1472/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The numbers of nurses and midwives in training for academic year 2008-2009 are as follows:

	Commissioned places
Nursing	724
Midwifery	62
Open University Part-Time	36
Total	822

At present, there are no plans to reduce the number of commissioned places in 2009/10 and 2010/11. A review of the Nursing and Midwifery Workforce is currently underway and it will help inform future workforce demand and supply.

Access NI

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that Access NI has the legal right to do background checks on anyone moving to Northern Ireland from the mainland UK or from abroad. (AQW 1473/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (NI) Order 2003 requires that individuals who wish to work with children in regulated position or vulnerable adults in a care position, either in paid or voluntary positions, undergo a pre-employment vetting check.

Before a pre-employment vetting check can be undertaken as part of the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (NI) Order 2003 arrangements, the individual applying for the position must have given their approval to the check taking place.

Other Departments have similar requirements for specific areas which fall under their responsibility e.g. the Department of Education.

With regard to the legal basis on which AccessNI undertake such checks this is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

Health Centre in Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to visit the health centre in Ballycastle. (AQW 1474/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no immediate plans to visit Ballycastle Health Centre. However I may have an opportunity to do so in the future.

Wheelchair Users

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail which health centres provide adequate facilities to accommodate wheelchair users; and what plans he has to carry out an audit of health centres to determine their ability to meet the needs of wheelchair users. (AQW 1475/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been advised that all health

centres provide facilities to accommodate wheelchair users with the exception of Greyabbey Health Centre. Greyabbey is an old building which is only used periodically and has been found impractical to improve from a DDA perspective; it is the subject of a review of Primary Care Services within the Trust. In the case of Ballycastle Health Centre there is wheelchair access to the building, common areas and treatment area. However, as I indicated in my answer to AQW 795/09 which relates specifically to Ballycastle Health Centre, the Trust is currently assessing what further work can be done within the current budget which will include improving wheelchair access. Separately, I have asked Health Estates to confirm with Health and Social Care Trusts the position regarding accessibility by wheelchair users to all relevant facilities for which Trusts are responsible.

Minor Ailments Scheme

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) patients are currently benefiting from the Minor Ailments Scheme; and (ii) pharmacists are currently participating in the scheme. (AQW 1481/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) A record of the number of patients who have benefited from the scheme is not currently held. However, the latest figures available from the Central Services Agency from April 2008 to July 2008 show a total of 74,909 consultations were carried out. The number of consultations may not equate to the number of patients as some patients may present on more than one occasion for a consultation. It should be noted that figures for the number of consultations carried out under the enhanced service from the 1 August 2008 are not yet available.
- (ii) The number of pharmacists currently participating in the scheme are as follows:

Southern Health Board	4
Northern Health Board	4
Eastern Health Board	1
Western Health Board	1

QAA Regulations

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify that all Health Service staff are following QAA regulations. (AQW 1503/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Quality Assurance Agency is an independent body tasked with defining academic standards and quality in higher education.

In Northern Ireland, the Quality Assurance Agency works with the Department of Employment and Learning and higher education institutions, including Queen's University and University of Ulster, to maintain quality and standards of academic awards.

My Department commissions a number of undergraduate and postgraduate healthcare courses from both QUB and UU; these include nursing, medical, dental and allied health professional courses. In addition to these academic programmes being reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency, they must be validated by appropriate professional bodies.

Personality Disorder

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to change the terminology in the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986 to include people with borderline personality disorder. (AQW 1522/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following recommendations contained in the Bamford Review, my Department plans to issue in the near future a consultation document on a legislative framework for taking forward new mental health and mental capacity legislation in Northern Ireland. The framework will contain proposals to redefine mental disorder.

Health Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost to the Health Service of employing agency staff, for the last 3 years. (AQW 1528/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of employing Agency staff in our Health Trusts over each of the last three complete financial years is as follows:

Year	Cost to Health Trusts	% of total salaries and wages bill
1 April 2007 – 31 March 2008	£39,926,000	2.50
1 April 2006 – 31 March 2007	£40,608,000	2.65
1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006	£38,506,000	2.76

Health Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people work for the Health Service. (AQW 1531/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: According to the Human Resource Management System, as at 30 June 2008 there were 60,281 (51,646.95 whole-time equivalent) staff working in Health & Social Care, excluding bank staff, home helps and staff with a whole-time equivalent less than or equal to 0.03. There are a further 17,200 of these staff, whose whole-time equivalent cannot be accurately provided due to the variable or sessional nature of their working pattern.

A breakdown of the Health & Social Care workforce can be found on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/work_force/stats-research.htm

Health Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the cost to the Health Service of training new nurses. (AQW 1532/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Based on the rates for academic year 2008-2009, the cost in Northern Ireland of training an average student nurse to qualification is in the region of £37,000 per student.

Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the guidance published by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence on the treatment of wet age-related macular degeneration has been endorsed by his Department; and when it will be implemented. (AQW 1533/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance on the use of ranibizumab (Lucentis) and pegaptanib (Macugen) for the treatment of wet age-related macular degeneration (wet AMD) has recently been endorsed by my Department as applicable to Northern Ireland.

My Department expects the HSC to put plans in place within three months to facilitate implementation of the guidance. Providing these treatments in line with the NICE guidance will require a significant expansion of the existing service. Recruitment of the additional staff needed to deliver the new level of service safely and effectively is currently under way.

In the meantime, Health and Social Services Boards will continue to fund treatment with wet AMD drugs for patients with the greatest clinical priority.

Causeway Hospital

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for his assessment the view of medical specialists and the chairman of NICHHS, about the introduction of a stroke unit to the Causeway Hospital; and (ii) if his Department will review the case for the establishment of a specialist stroke unit at the Causeway Hospital. (AQW 1538/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In June, I announced a new strategy for stroke services in Northern Ireland. To support the implementation of the measures recommended within that strategy, I have allocated an additional £14m over the next three years, and thereafter a recurrent investment of £9m, to improve outcomes for stroke patients.

A regional stroke implementation group has been established to bring forward a detailed implementation plan which will address each of the measures set out in the Stroke Strategy. The group includes membership from Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts and the voluntary sector, including Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke. Within the work of that implementation work, it will be for Boards and Trusts to determine the number and location of specialist stroke units required to meet the needs of the populations they serve.

Underage and Binge Drinking

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department is taking to encourage young people to drink less alcohol. (AQW 1542/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) identifies addressing underage and binge drinking as key priorities. Regionally, a range of public information campaigns have been undertaken to provide more information to children and young people on the dangers of alcohol and drug misuse, including the publication of leaflets and websites.

At the local level, the four Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams commission and fund a range of services, initiatives and programmes in support of their local action plans. These provide support to children and young people's groups that are working directly or indirectly towards improving young people's awareness of the dangers of alcohol misuse. Examples include:

- targeted education and prevention programmes aimed at vulnerable young people;
- community & family support services;
- alternative criminal justice options; and
- outreach services.

However, young people's drinking cannot be effectively tackled by my Department in isolation. We are therefore in the process of developing a cross-sectoral, integrated Young People's Drinking Action Plan, and this plan will look at reducing young people's demand for alcohol, further restricting supply, and providing effective treatment and support for those who require additional help.

Dental Practices

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact on older people of dental practices becoming fully or partly private. (AQW 1546/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At present, there is no legal or contractual obligation on General Dental Practitioners, who are independent contractors, to accept any patient for health service treatment, no matter what their individual circumstances are.

My Department, however, is currently in negotiations with the dental profession to move away from these arrangements and into new contracting arrangements with dental practitioners which will modernise dental services and ensure that everyone, including older people, have access to high quality, effective dental care.

I acknowledge that older people, among others, may experience difficulties when their dentist decides to cease providing Health Service treatment. My officials are working on a tender for additional dental services throughout Northern Ireland, with an eye to having identified a preferred bidder(s) for this work in the New Year. When these additional 36 dentists are in place, I fully expect the current dental access problem to ease considerably for everyone in Northern Ireland. In the interim, the Health Boards' Dental Directors are endeavouring to help people access health service dentistry wherever possible.

Dental Care Provision

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proposals he has to ensure 24 hour dental care provision in Belfast. (AQW 1547/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health Service dental care is delivered

during normal working hours. All general dental practitioners have a professional and ethical obligation to provide a comprehensive service for their registered patients, which should include appropriate emergency provision. Health Service dentists are required under regulations to provide emergency cover for patients requiring prompt care and treatment. Patients should clarify with their practice what arrangements are in place when the practice is not normally open.

In addition the Hospital Dental Service within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board (EHSSB) area which includes Belfast, provides a 24 hour / 365 day on-call service through Accident and Emergency departments at the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Ulster Hospital with a remit to cover patients presenting with significant trauma, spreading infection or haemorrhage. Patients attending who are assessed as not falling into one or more of these categories are advised to attend a high-street dentist for necessary care.

Furthermore, the EHSSB also provide a Relief of Dental Pain clinic at Belfast City Hospital operates the following hours:

- 7:00pm – 10:00pm every night of the year;
- 10:00am – 1:00pm every Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holiday morning; and
- 2:30pm – 5:30pm every Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holiday afternoon.

Anyone presenting with an urgent dental problem can attend and staff on duty will deal with everyone who is assessed as requiring care during these hours. Care provided is limited to what the on-duty dentist considers is appropriate in the circumstances to best relieve the patient's immediate pain.

It is not deemed appropriate to provide 24 hour access for all dental care. There are, however, a few dental conditions that require 24 hour access: significant trauma, uncontrolled bleeding and spreading infection are the only 3 oral conditions which require 24 hour cover and this cover is provided by the A&E departments as detailed above.

I am satisfied therefore that emergency dental care provision in Belfast is appropriate and meets the obligation of our health and social care service..

Health Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for his assessment of the trends in the age profile of the population; and (ii) to forecast change of provision that the Health Service may need to take as a consequence of these population trends. (AQW 1548/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Our population over 65 is set to more than double in the next 50 years.

As we look to the future, we must use our resources more effectively and efficiently, avoiding inappropriate hospital admission and delayed discharge. My Department is firmly committed to continuing to transform the way that 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.

Smoking Ban

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) fines; and (ii) warnings have been issued for smoking in a public place, in each Health and Social Services Board area, since the ban was introduced. (AQW 1551/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Enforcement of smoke-free legislation is the responsibility of district councils' Environmental Health Departments. Council areas are not co-terminus with Health and Social Services Board boundaries and, as a consequence, the information requested has been set out in the table below by council groupings. The table covers the offence of smoking in a smoke-free place up to and including 30 June 2008, the latest date for which information is available.

Area	Fixed Penalty Notices Issued	Written Warnings Given
Belfast	14	43
Eastern	7	70
Northern	17	48
Southern	6	170
Western	3	63
Total	47	394

Skin Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to reduce the incidences of skin cancer. (AQW 1559/09)

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
1	12,517											
2	12,922	12,922										

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department issued a melanoma strategy in 1998 with the overall aim of reducing morbidity and mortality from skin cancers, especially malignant melanoma in Northern Ireland. The Department has provided funding to assist with the implementation of this strategy, with resources being deployed on research and in raising public awareness as to the risks of sun exposure.

The strategy has since been reviewed and the Department is currently examining options, both in the short and long term, for developing a new strategy and action plan which will reflect strategic changes and recent research. A number of relevant interested bodies will be invited to participate in this work.

A significant risk factor affecting the incidence of skin cancer may be the use of artificial tanning devices such as sun beds. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) provides advice to Government Departments and the Devolved Administrations in relation to the health effects of natural and man-made radiation. COMARE has been asked by the four UK Health Departments to provide advice on the evidence relating to the health effects of sunbed use and to make recommendations. The COMARE report is expected by the end of 2008 and is likely to inform future policy development.

In addition, the Sunbed Working Group of the Northern Ireland Melanoma Strategy Implementation Group (NIMSIG) is currently examining issues relating to sunbeds and their use.

Salary Bands

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of all salary bands in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1586/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The remuneration paid to HSC staff depends on the job-related skills, knowledge and responsibilities.

Non-medical staff (with the exception of the most senior managers) have their jobs assessed using the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation Scheme which determines the correct basic pay. Rates of pay relating to each pay band are set out in the table below

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
3	13,269	13,269										
4	13,617	13,617										
5		14,023										
6		14,428										
7		14,834	14,834									
8		15,356	15,356									
9		15,950	15,950									
10			16,307									
11			16,781									
12			17,316	17,316								
13			17,732	17,732								
14				18,385								
15				19,038								
16				19,631								
17				20,225	20,225							
18				20,818	20,818							
19					21,373							
20					22,085							
21					22,797							
22					23,450							
23					24,103	24,103						
24					25,054	25,054						
25					26,123	26,123						
26						27,191						
27						28,141						
28						29,091	29,091					
29						30,041	30,041					
30						31,109	31,109					
31						32,653	32,653					
32							33,603					
33							34,672					
34							35,859					
35							37,106	37,106				
36							38,352	38,352				
37								39,896				
38								41,439				
39								43,221	43,221			
40								44,527	44,527			

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
41									46,782			
42									49,394			
43									52,007	52,007		
44									53,432	53,432		
45										55,806		
46										58,419		
47										62,337	62,337	
48										64,118	64,118	
49											66,790	
50											70,055	
51											73,617	73,617
52											77,179	77,179
53												80,883
54												84,765
55												88,835
56												93,098

Salary Bands

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of all salary bands in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1587/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The remuneration paid to HSC staff

depends on the job-related skills, knowledge and responsibilities.

Non-medical staff (with the exception of the most senior managers) have their jobs assessed using the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation Scheme which determines the correct basic pay. Rates of pay relating to each pay band are set out in the table below

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
1	12,517											
2	12,922	12,922										
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7		14,834	14,834									
8		15,356	15,356									
9		15,950	15,950									
10			16,307									
11			16,781									
12			17,316	17,316								

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
13			17,732	17,732								
14				18,385								
15				19,038								
16				19,631								
17				20,225	20,225							
18				20,818	20,818							
19					21,373							
20					22,085							
21					22,797							
22					23,450							
23					24,103	24,103						
24					25,054	25,054						
25					26,123	26,123						
26						27,191						
27						28,141						
28						29,091	29,091					
29						30,041	30,041					
30						31,109	31,109					
31						32,653	32,653					
32							33,603					
33							34,672					
34							35,859					
35							37,106	37,106				
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37								39,896				
38								41,439				
39								43,221	43,221			
40								44,527	44,527			
41									46,782			
42									49,394			
43									52,007	52,007		
44									53,432	53,432		
45										55,806		
46										58,419		
47										62,337	62,337	
48										64,118	64,118	
49											66,790	
50											70,055	

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
51											73,617	73,617
52											77,179	77,179
53												80,883
54												84,765
55												88,835
56												93,098

Salary Bands

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of all salary bands in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1588/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The remuneration paid to HSC staff

depends on the job-related skills, knowledge and responsibilities.

Non-medical staff (with the exception of the most senior managers) have their jobs assessed using the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation Scheme which determines the correct basic pay. Rates of pay relating to each pay band are set out in the table below

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
1	12,517											
2	12,922	12,922										
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15				19,038								
16				19,631								
17				20,225	20,225							
18				20,818	20,818							
19					21,373							
20					22,085							
21					22,797							
22					23,450							

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
23					24,103	24,103						
24					25,054	25,054						
25					26,123	26,123						
26						27,191						
27						28,141						
28						29,091	29,091					
29						30,041	30,041					
30						31,109	31,109					
31						32,653	32,653					
32							33,603					
33							34,672					
34							35,859					
35							37,106	37,106				
36							38,352	38,352				
37								39,896				
38								41,439				
39								43,221	43,221			
40								44,527	44,527			
41									46,782			
42									49,394			
43									52,007	52,007		
44									53,432	53,432		
45										55,806		
46										58,419		
47										62,337	62,337	
48										64,118	64,118	
49											66,790	
50											70,055	
51											73,617	73,617
52											77,179	77,179
53												80,883
54												84,765
55												88,835
56												93,098

Salary Bands

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of all salary bands in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1589/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The remuneration paid to HSC staff

depends on the job-related skills, knowledge and responsibilities.

Non-medical staff (with the exception of the most senior managers) have their jobs assessed using the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation Scheme which determines the correct basic pay. Rates of pay relating to each pay band are set out in the table below

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
1	12,517											
2	12,922	12,922										
3	13,269	13,269										
4	13,617	13,617										
5		14,023										
6		14,428										
7		14,834	14,834									
8		15,356	15,356									
9		15,950	15,950									
10			16,307									
11			16,781									
12			17,316	17,316								
13			17,732	17,732								
14				18,385								
15				19,038								
16				19,631								
17				20,225	20,225							
18				20,818	20,818							
19					21,373							
20					22,085							
21					22,797							
22					23,450							
23					24,103	24,103						
24					25,054	25,054						
25					26,123	26,123						
26						27,191						
27						28,141						
28						29,091	29,091					
29						30,041	30,041					
30						31,109	31,109					
31						32,653	32,653					
32							33,603					

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
33							34,672					
34							35,859					
35							37,106	37,106				
36							38,352	38,352				
37								39,896				
38								41,439				
39								43,221	43,221			
40								44,527	44,527			
41									46,782			
42									49,394			
43									52,007	52,007		
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50											70,055	
51											73,617	73,617
52											77,179	77,179
53												80,883
54												84,765
55												88,835
56												93,098

Home Help Assistance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many requests there have been for home help assistance in the (i) Carrickfergus; and (ii) Larne, areas, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1590/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Health Village in Banbridge

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on progress with the health village in Banbridge. (AQW 1600/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The current proposals are for a new Health and Care Centre along with a new Learning Disability Day Centre within the Banbridge Community Health Village.

The Southern HSC Trust is currently finalising the business case for this project and it is expected to be resubmitted to my Department within the next few weeks. Subject to the normal approval process the business case will need to be appraised by the Department of Finance and Personnel before a final decision can be made. I anticipate a decision on this new development will be made in the Autumn.

This project is still a high priority for the Southern Trust and was included in their list of priority projects submitted as part of the recent Review of Capital Priorities, which completed at the end of September.

Blood Transfusion Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the most recent report by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency on the Blood Transfusion Service. (AQW 1638/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am fully aware of the findings of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) arising from its inspection of the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS) in April 2008. While there was no evidence of any patient harm, there was a clear need for urgent action to address the issues identified.

I have ensured that NIBTS is implementing a comprehensive programme of actions and that this work is given the highest priority by the Agency. I have been advised that substantial progress has already been made. A full re-inspection of the NIBTS by MHRA will take place in November 2008 to

confirm the Agency is meeting the requirements of the Blood Safety and Quality Regulations 2005.

I shall ensure that the NI population continues to have access to safe, high quality blood supplies.

Salary Bands

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of all salary bands in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1649/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The remuneration paid to HSC staff depends on the job-related skills, knowledge and responsibilities.

Non-medical staff (with the exception of the most senior managers) have their jobs assessed using the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation Scheme which determines the correct basic pay. Rates of pay relating to each pay band are set out in the table below

Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
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17				20,225	20,225							
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Point	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8				Band 9
								Range A	Range B	Range C	Range D	
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50											70,055	
51											73,617	73,617
52											77,179	77,179
53												80,883
54												84,765
55												88,835
56												93,098

Breast Screening

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will free breast screening be put in place for people 65 years old and over. (AQW 1650/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently, women between the age of 50 and 64 are routinely invited for breast screening. My Department plans to extend the age range to include women up to the age of 70 from March 2009. There are no plans to screen women who are over 70 years old.

New Omagh Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the new Omagh Hospital. (AQW 1651/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The new Omagh Enhanced Local Hospital Complex will cost £190million and will include the Core Hospital, a Health & Care Centre, Mental Health Facility along with Community and Support Services.

The new Omagh Enhanced Local Hospital Complex is planned to be completed in 2013.

Limavady Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Limavady Fire Station will benefit from the additional funding for the Fire and Rescue Service announced on 16 October 2008. (AQW 1687/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes. I refer the honourable member to the answer I gave to David McClarty during Oral Questions on 25th February 2008 when I indicated that Limavady is on the list of Stations for upgrade. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is currently looking for a suitable site in the town for a new station.

Learning Disabilities

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on new investments being made for supported living for persons with learning disabilities, in the Budget. (AQW 1690/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department will be investing a total of £33m in learning disability services over the next three years resulting in an additional £17m

recurrent investment. Some of this investment will be used to provide the appropriate community infrastructure and support mechanisms to facilitate supported living.

The Department for Social Development's Supporting People Fund provides Housing Support Services for people with a learning disability. Seven schemes are scheduled to commence in the current financial year with a further 14 schemes scheduled during the following 2 years.

A number of additional schemes have been identified which will be required to meet health and social care requirements relating to the implementation of Bamford Review recommendations in the next 5 years. These schemes are at various stages of planning but have not yet been progressed to the Supporting People Capital Programme.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will ring fence £1m of the £164m investment for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, to ensure that the second appliance remains in Portstewart, for at least the next 10 years of the investment period. (AQW 1715/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Determining priorities for the capital budget is a matter for the Chief Fire Officer and the Board of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

The proposal to withdraw the second pumping appliance from Portstewart Fire Station was issued for public consultation on 1st October and is available on the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service website. No final decisions will be taken until the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has had an opportunity to consider the responses to the consultation.

Minor Ailments Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to encourage pharmacists to re-enter the Minor Ailments Scheme. (AQW 1716/09)

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.

I have been proactive in encouraging pharmacists to join the scheme as have my officials. At the end of June 2008, before the introduction of the enhanced Scheme on 1 August 2008, I invited the

Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC) to meet with me to discuss their concerns. PCC are the representative body for community pharmacy and act on their behalf in negotiations with the Department.

This offer to meet was declined. I wrote again to PCC in mid-August 2008 extending the same invitation to meet. On this occasion PCC accepted the offer and a meeting took place on 15 September 2008 at which there was a useful exchange on the Minor Ailments Scheme.

I agreed to consider the points raised by PCC and I am happy to say that another meeting has been scheduled to take place shortly to discuss the way forward.

Cataract Operations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cataract operations have been carried out by the Health Service in the Independent Sector, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1718/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cataract operations carried out by the Health Service in the Independent Sector, during each of the last five years, is not collected centrally by the Department. Provision of such data by Health and Social Care Trusts would incur a disproportionate cost.

Cataract Operations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cataract operations have been carried out by the Health Service in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1719/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cataract operations carried out in Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland in each of the past five years is detailed below:

Year	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Cataract Operations	7,676	8,513	8,391	9,441	8,718

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

These figures do not relate to individuals, as a person may have more than one cataract procedure carried out in a year.

Cataract Operations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many people are diagnosed with cataracts each year. (AQW 1720/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland with a diagnosis of cataracts in each of the past five years is detailed below:

Year	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Admissions	7,873	8,776	8,652	9,744	9,008

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

Deaths and discharges are used to approximate admissions. These figures do not equate to individuals as a person may be admitted to hospital more than one in a year or across a number of years.

Cataract Operations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the number of people who are currently waiting for cataract operations. (AQW 1721/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The inpatient waiting time position, for cataract surgery, at 30th June 2008, the most recent quarter for which official data are available, is outlined in the table below.

	Time Waiting in Weeks			
	0 - 6	> 6 - 13	> 13 - 21	> 21
No. of people waiting for admission to hospital in NI for cataract surgery	1075	1194	416	0

Source: DHSSPS Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset.

The average waiting time for cataract surgery, at 30th June 2008, was 57 days.

Cataract Operations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for cataract operations. (AQW 1722/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The inpatient waiting time position,

for cataract surgery, at 30th June 2008, the most recent quarter for which official data are available, is outlined in the table below.

	Time Waiting in Weeks			
	0 - 6	> 6 - 13	> 13 - 21	> 21
No. of people waiting for admission to hospital in NI for cataract surgery	1075	1194	416	0

Source: DHSSPS Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset.

The average waiting time for cataract surgery, at 30th June 2008, was 57 days.

Musgrave Park Hospital

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if a decision has been made regarding the closure of 20 orthopaedic beds in Musgrave Park Hospital; and to detail what impact the closure will have on nursing staff. (AQW 1724/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following a review in relation to admissions and day procedure cases within Orthopaedics, the Belfast Trust has taken the decision to close a 20 bed orthopaedic unit at Musgrave Park Hospital. This will take place on a phased basis. The decision will not affect the level of service provision to patients.

Discussions have been held with the staff members likely to be affected in order to discuss their needs and options. There will be no redundancies.

Anaesthetists

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of anaesthetists currently working in the Health Service, in each hospital; (ii) the total number of anaesthetists there should be; (iii) the total shortfall; and (iv) how many operations have been rescheduled and delayed because of this shortfall. (AQW 1725/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Number of Anaesthetists employed and Anaesthetist Vacancies in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care by Hospital as at 30th September 2008

Hospital	Anaesthetists Employed		Vacancies for Anaesthetists	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Altnagelvin Hospital	27	27.00	5	4.30
Antrim / Whiteabbey Hospital	22	22.00	7	7.00
Royal Victoria Hospital	119	113.43	1	1.00
Belfast City / Musgrave Park Hospitals	51	47.79	2	1.20
Causeway Hospital	11	11.00	2	2.00
Craigavon Area Hospital	20	19.50	0	0.00
Daisy Hill Hospital	11	11.00	3	3.00
Downe Hospital	2	2.00	2	2.00
Erne Hospital	8	8.00	1	1.00
Lagan Valley Hospital	7	7.00	0	0.00
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	13	12.55	1	0.50
Mid Ulster Hospital	4	4.00	0	0.00
Tyrone County Hospital	5	4.80	1	1.00
Ulster Hospital	52	51.80	0	0.00
Total	352	341.87	25	23.00

Source: HSC Trusts

WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Staff and vacancy information includes Anaesthetists working at all medical grades (including Consultant, Staff Grade, Associate Specialist, Specialty Registrar and Foundation House Officer).

The table above sets out the number of anaesthetists as requested, showing 352 in post, a shortfall of 25 on the total funded. Although no data is collected regarding delayed or rescheduled operations, data on operating list cancellations shows no correlation with these vacancies.

Medical Registration

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the guidelines produced by his Department (i) on which nationalities can and cannot be medically registered; and (ii) the registration documentation required for each nationality. (AQW 1726/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Registration with a General Practitioner in Northern Ireland is not based on a person's nationality. The entire entitlement to health service treatment process, of which registration with a GP Practice is a part, is based on whether a person is ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland, and is contained in guidance Circular HSS (PCD) 10/2000 issued by the Department in 2000.

Any person intending to live in Northern Ireland for a period of not less than six months is considered to be "ordinarily resident". Documentation which they will need to register with a GP practice can consist of a valid National Identity Card, passport or European Health Insurance Card for nationals of other EU countries, along with valid visas or work permits for those people coming to Northern Ireland from outside of the European Economic Area.

Alcohol Consumption

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the relationship between the pricing of alcohol for sale and problems associated with alcohol consumption. (AQW 1740/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Research has shown a clear relationship between price and levels of alcohol consumption, and also between price and levels of alcohol-related harm. I am therefore particularly concerned that research has shown that, in real terms, alcohol is 62% more affordable today than it was in 1980.

However, there are other factors which impact on alcohol consumption and related harm, such as its availability, marketing and promotion. These are issues which are not the responsibility of any one Government Department, and therefore I will continue to address these issues with my colleagues in the Executive. I will also consider how we can address the issue of price locally, and raise the issue with my colleagues in the other parts of the UK.

Domestic Violence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of hospital or GP treatments that were the result of domestic violence or abuse, broken down by (i) male; and (ii) female. (AQW 1754/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Social Services At Risk Register

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children currently on the Social Services 'At Risk' Register, broken down by District Council area. (AQW 1756/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Hoax Ambulance Calls

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average number of hoax ambulance calls received per week in each constituency, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1757/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Constituency	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Belfast East	3.7	3.3	3.4
Belfast North	6.4	6.3	6.7
Belfast South	7.3	6.1	7.1
Belfast West	8.6	6.5	5.5
East Antrim	2.8	2.0	2.1
East Londonderry	3.4	2.8	2.9
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	3.0	3.5	2.2
Foyle	6.6	6.1	5.7
Lagan Valley	3.1	3.0	2.7
Mid Ulster	2.7	3.9	2.4
Newry and Armagh	4.3	4.6	4.5
North Antrim	4.4	2.9	3.1
North Down	4.9	3.0	2.3

Constituency	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
South Antrim	3.2	2.6	2.6
South Down	4.0	3.5	3.9
Strangford	3.2	3.4	2.8
Upper Bann	4.0	4.0	4.1
West Tyrone	3.6	3.5	3.3
Undetermined origin	90.9	87.9	90.0

Note: Figures include hoax calls, instances where there was no case or nothing found at the scene and where the caller hung up without giving details.

New Medicines

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average time it takes the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence to introduce new medicines to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1766/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is not responsible for the introduction of new medicines into Northern Ireland. NICE make recommendations on the most clinical and cost effective treatments for use in the National Health Service in England and Wales.

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 here.

My Department currently aims to issue advice to local Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations on the applicability of individual NICE guidelines here within three months of NICE issuing their final guidance. On receipt of this advice, HSC organisations have usually three months to put plans in place to facilitate implementation of the guidance. This process is currently under review.

Community Pharmacy Contracts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why it has taken 5 years to agree new Community Pharmacy Contracts. (AQW 1767/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department's community pharmacy contract negotiating team has been negotiating a new contract with the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC), the representative body for

community pharmacy, since April 2004. To date a total of 11 formal contract meetings have been held.

So far the main developments have been a jointly agreed framework for the new contract, preparation by the departmental team of detailed service specifications and standards for the services to be provided, a survey commissioned jointly by the Department and PCC into the costs of running pharmacies in Northern Ireland and some discussion on introducing certain services as the first part of a phased approach to implementing the new contract.

The Department has made a number of offers to PCC in relation to the provision of a Minor Ailments Service and Repeat Dispensing, two key initiatives of the new contract. Unfortunately PCC have to date rejected all offers and for some time negotiations have stalled.

While I am clearly disappointed with the rate of progress on the new pharmacy contract, particularly in recent months, I am convinced that real progress is possible and I believe that the time is now right to look to the future.

I see a key role for community pharmacy in providing a range of services for local people and I will be looking to the profession to engage meaningfully with my officials to ensure that patients in Northern Ireland benefit from the services the rest of the UK enjoy. My door is always open to the representatives of community pharmacy and indeed I am meeting PCC again in the near future. I firmly believe that the new contract is the way ahead for community pharmacy and I believe that, with willingness on both sides, real progress can be made in the coming months.

New Downpatrick Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the new Downpatrick Hospital. (AQW 1768/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of the new Enhanced Local Downe Hospital, which will open in Summer 2009, is £64 million.

People Suffering from Obesity

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people suffer from obesity. (AQW 1777/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Obesity levels in Northern Ireland are monitored through the Health and Social Wellbeing Survey and estimated using the Body Mass Index

(BMI), which is a widely used indicator of body fat levels calculated from a person's height and weight. The most recent survey completed was in 2005/06, and the results showed that 24% of adults (aged 16 and over) were obese.

In 2005/06, height and weight measurements were also sought from those aged 2 years or above in households participating in the survey. The calculation of BMI in children also depends on the age and sex of the child and there is some debate over the most appropriate way to use BMI to record childhood obesity rates in the UK. Using the UK National BMI percentiles approach, 18% of children aged 2-15 years were obese. However, there are some concerns that this method could overestimate obesity. An alternative approach which is gaining acceptance was put forward by the International Obesity Task Force. Using this approach, almost one in ten (8%) children were obese although there are some concerns that this method could underestimate obesity.

Retained Firefighters

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there was only one recruitment drive in five years for retained fire fighters in Portstewart. (AQW 1801/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recruitment campaigns are planned regularly for retained (part time) personnel for all Station areas throughout Northern Ireland only where and when vacancies exist.

In addition to a recruitment campaign in August 2005 for retained firefighters for Portstewart, there had been a campaign that completed in June 2002, one that completed in October 2003 and there is a current retained firefighter campaign (October 2008) for Portstewart that has not yet been completed.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(I) DENTISTS' REGISTERED TO PROVIDE HEALTH SERVICE DENTAL TREATMENT IN THE LARNE DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA².

Initials	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
J	Blair ³	1 Marine Road, Carnlough	BT44 0HE	Larne
		9/11 Glenarm Road, Larne	BT40 1BN	Larne
J	Christie	14 Victoria Road, Larne	BT40 1RN	Larne
P J	Donnelly ³	1 Marine Road, Carnlough	BT44 0HE	Larne
		9/11 Glenarm Road, Larne	BT40 1BN	Larne
F	Lynch	137 Old Glenarm Road, Larne	BT40 1NH	Larne

Removal of Fire Appliance

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which Census Output Areas were used in the preparation of the consultation document regarding the removal of Portstewart's second fire appliance. (AQW 1802/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Census Output Areas used to prepare the Portstewart consultation document were supplied by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Analysis of risk within Portstewart was carried out with reference to those Output Areas whose geographical centre points fall within the Portstewart Fire Station Area boundary.

Removal of Fire Appliance

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the full data information factors used in the GIS modelling system in the preparation of the consultation document regarding the removal of Portstewart's second fire appliance. (AQW 1803/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Data used within the Geographical Information System (GIS) in relation to the Portstewart Consultation Document includes map data supplied by Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI), demographic data supplied by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and historical incident data held internally by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

Health Service Dentists

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all the Health Service dentists in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey. (AQW 1809/09)

Initials	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
W M R	Mcfaul	11 Victoria Road, Larne	BT40 1RT	Larne
A	McGahan	14 Victoria Road, Larne	BT40 1RN	Larne
R	McGarel	11 Victoria Road, Larne	BT40 1RT	Larne
I	Morrison	11 Thorndale Avenue, Larne	BT40 1QX	Larne
T	O'boyle	14 Victoria Road, Larne	BT40 1RN	Larne

Source: Central Services Agency

(II) DENTISTS¹ REGISTERED TO PROVIDE HEALTH SERVICE DENTAL TREATMENT IN THE CARRICKFERGUS DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA².

Initials	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
L	Abbott	50 Station Road, Greenisland	BT38 8TP	Carrickfergus
D	Athimoolam	2 Market Place, Carrickfergus	BT38 7AW	Carrickfergus
J	Blair ³	19 St Brides Street, Carrickfergus	BT38 8AF	Carrickfergus
T	Buchanan	19 St Brides Street, Carrickfergus	BT38 8AF	Carrickfergus
B	Campomanes De Allende	2 Market Place, Carrickfergus	BT38 7AW	Carrickfergus
M	Clements	22 West Street, Carrickfergus	BT38 7AR	Carrickfergus
H A	Gardner	14 Marine Parade, Whitehead	BT38 9QP	Carrickfergus
W R	Hanna	51 Victoria Road, Carrickfergus	BT38 7JJ	Carrickfergus
W N	Harper	22 North Street, Carrickfergus	BT38 7AQ	Carrickfergus
A	Law	22 West Street, Carrickfergus	BT38 7AR	Carrickfergus
A H	McClure	14 Marine Parade, Whitehead	BT38 9QP	Carrickfergus
C E	McVeigh	14 Balmoral Avenue, Whitehead	BT38 9QD	Carrickfergus
J C	McVeigh	50 Station Road, Greenisland	BT38 8TP	Carrickfergus
N	O'kane	22 West Street, Carrickfergus	BT38 7AR	Carrickfergus
L	Russell	50 Station Road, Greenisland	BT38 8TP	Carrickfergus
R M R	Thompson	51 Victoria Road, Carrickfergus	BT38 7JJ	Carrickfergus

Source: Central Services Agency

(III) DENTISTS¹ REGISTERED TO PROVIDE HEALTH SERVICE DENTAL TREATMENT IN THE NEWTOWNABBEY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA².

Initials	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
B C	Alton	105 Monkstown Road, Monkstown, Newtownabbey	BT37 0LG	Newtownabbey
L M	Armstrong	20 Portland Avenue, Glengormley	BT36 5EY	Newtownabbey
A C	Beresford	22 Doagh Road, Ballyclare	BT39 9BG	Newtownabbey
S	Best	105 Monkstown Road, Monkstown, Newtownabbey	BT37 0LG	Newtownabbey
C	Bloomer	138 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9QR	Newtownabbey
P	Burns	105 Monkstown Road, Monkstown, Newtownabbey	BT37 0LG	Newtownabbey
J	Costelloe	138 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9QR	Newtownabbey
H	Douglas	30 Rashee Road, Ballyclare	BT39 9HJ	Newtownabbey
S C	Doyle	5 Hightown Road, Glengormley	BT36 7TZ	Newtownabbey

Initials	Surname	Address	Postcode	District Council
B S	Ferris	138 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9QR	Newtownabbey
K	Gordon	105 Monkstown Road, Monkstown, Newtownabbey	BT37 0LG	Newtownabbey
E	Gordon	22 Hightown Road, Glengormley	BT36 7UA	Newtownabbey
M A	Irwin	5 Hightown Road, Glengormley	BT36 7TZ	Newtownabbey
M B	Kirk	105 Monkstown Road, Monkstown, Newtownabbey	BT37 0LG	Newtownabbey
Z	Kviklyte	53/55 Main Street, Ballyclare	BT39 9AA	Newtownabbey
A	Lalor	604 Shore Road, Whiteabbey	BT37 0SN	Newtownabbey
P	Lowe	30 Rashee Road, Ballyclare	BT39 9HJ	Newtownabbey
T	Martin	604 Shore Road, Whiteabbey	BT37 0SN	Newtownabbey
F J	Mccann	53/55 Main Street, Ballyclare	BT39 9AA	Newtownabbey
J	Mcclinton	106 Ballyclare Road, Newtownabbey	BT36 5HN	Newtownabbey
G J	Mccloskey	604 Shore Road, Whiteabbey	BT37 0SN	Newtownabbey
M	McKeever	106 Ballyclare Road, Newtownabbey	BT36 5HN	Newtownabbey
J S	Mckissick	30 Rashee Road, Ballyclare	BT39 9HJ	Newtownabbey
T	Mckissick	30 Rashee Road, Ballyclare	BT39 9HJ	Newtownabbey
F	McLean	2 Portland Avenue, Glengormley	BT36 5EY	Newtownabbey
D	McNally	604 Shore Road, Whiteabbey	BT37 0SN	Newtownabbey
D A R	Mellor	292 Shore Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9RW	Newtownabbey
M C	Mellor	292 Shore Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9RW	Newtownabbey
J	Moore	292 Shore Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9RW	Newtownabbey
I	Thompson	138 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey	BT37 9QR	Newtownabbey
M	Tosh	22 Doagh Road, Ballyclare	BT39 9BG	Newtownabbey
P	Tumelty	22 Hightown Road, Glengormley	BT36 7UA	Newtownabbey
B W	Turner	2 Portland Avenue, Glengormley	BT36 5EY	Newtownabbey

Source: Central Services Agency

Notes:

1. Figures include Principal dentists only - excludes assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners.
2. Statistics are at 22nd October 2008 and are based on the location of the dental surgery where the dentist is employed.
3. P J Donnelly and J Blair each work in two different surgeries within Larne District Council Area. J Blair also works in a third surgery in Carrickfergus District Council Area. Individual dentists may also work in surgeries located in District Council Areas other than the three listed above.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the efforts being made to provide services for people with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. (AQW 1829/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People suffering from myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue (ME/CFS) syndrome in Northern Ireland have access to treatment from appropriate sections of the health service depending on the severity of their illness. The variability of symptoms in patients means that individual patients may need to access different disciplines of the health service. These may include GP care, community care

and support, neurology services and mental health services which can provide treatment like cognitive behaviour therapy, which is thought to help manage the illness.

A specialist ME/CFS clinic for the treatment of adults with mild to moderate symptoms is delivered at Belfast City Hospital by a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current

research initiatives into Myalgic Encephalomyelitis.
(AQW 1830/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department does not currently fund any research into Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME). Research in diseases like ME needs to be undertaken in specialised Centres of Excellence and co-ordinated at the national level.

Central Services Agency

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what investigations into George Brangam were conducted by the Central Services Agency during his time as its Director.
(AQW 1835/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been advised that there were two investigations conducted by the Central Services Agency into George Brangam during his time as Director/ Chief Legal Advisor.

The first investigation was conducted in 1987 following a query raised by a barrister employed by the Agency, regarding the non-receipt of payment for legal services. The investigation confirmed that payment had in fact been received and the Agency did not pursue the matter further.

The second investigation was conducted in November 1994 following complaints about the management style of George Brangam and another officer. The investigation made a number of recommendations which were implemented or under further consideration when Mr Brangam left the Agency in March 1995.

Obesity-Related Disorders

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people undergoing surgery for obesity-related disorders, in the last three years; and (ii) what future action he will take to address this. (AQW 1840/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people undergoing surgery for obesity-related disorders is not collected centrally.

At present, there is no recurrent funding for bariatric (weight loss) surgery in Northern Ireland. Health and Social Services Boards do not routinely commission bariatric surgery although they may consider applications for funding where exceptional clinical circumstances are presented.

Work is currently being taken forward to consider the possibility of providing such a service in Northern Ireland, including appropriate pre and post operative care and ongoing dietary support. This is currently being considered by the Health and Social Services Boards through the Regional Medical Services Group in the context of the assessed need for this service and other competing health and social care priorities.

Central Services Agency

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what payments were made by the Central Services Agency to relatives of George Brangam, during his time as its Director.
(AQW 1841/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Central Services Agency holds no details of payments made prior to March 1995, when George Brangam left the Agency.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people acquired clostridium difficile in each of the last 5 years, broken down by hospital; and how many people died as a result.
(AQW 1844/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Figures for the number of patient episodes of Clostridium difficile are not available prior January 2005.

Figures for 2005 and 2006 are not available in the format requested.

Figures for 2007 are provided in the table below:

CLOSTRIDIUM DIFFICILE EPISODES AND DEATHS, BY HOSPITAL, 2007

	No. of Episodes	No. of Deaths*
Belfast Trust	2007	2007 ^p
Royal Victoria Hospital	89	3
Belfast City Hospital	107	5
Green Park	11	
Mater Infirmorum Hospital	45	
Musgrave Park Hospital		
Cancer Centre	13	
Total	265	8
Northern Trust		
Antrim Area Hospital	149	8

	No. of Episodes	No. of Deaths*
Causeway Hospital	38	3
Dalriada Hospital	2	
Mid Ulster Hospital	27	
Moyle Hospital	0	1
Robinson Memorial	1	
Whiteabbey hospital	30	1
Total	247	13
South Eastern Trust		
Ards Hospital		
Bangor Hospital		
Down Hospital	19	
Lagan Valley Hospital	13	1
Ulster Hospital	187	2
Total	219	3
Southern Trust		
Craigavon Area Hospital	79	2
Daisy Hill Hospital	8	1
Lurgan Hospital	24	
Mullinure	4	
South Tyrone Hospital	1	
St Lukes		
Total	116	3

Western Trust	2007	2007^p
Altnagelvin Area Hospital	97	2
Erne Hospital (Sperrin Lakeland)	11	1
Tyrone County Hospital	27	
Waterside Hospital (ward 5)	0	
Total	135	3
Other		
All other places		4

Sources: CDSC for numbers of episodes; NISRA for numbers of deaths
No. of Deaths* is deaths for which C.difficile is recorded as the underlying cause.

^p Data for 2007 remain provisional until the publication of the 2007 Annual Report of the Registrar General due to be released November 2008

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the progress of the New Strategy Direction document

on drug and alcohol abuse; and to detail (i) the input from other Departments; and (ii) the involvement of Assembly Members. (AQW 1845/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The implementation of the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) began in October 2006, and its overall aim is to reduce the level of Alcohol and Drug related harm in Northern Ireland.

Progress to date includes:

- Approximately £6.5 million has been allocated to the implementation of the NSD in 08/09;
- regional alcohol and drug public information campaigns are being taken forward (with a particular emphasise on binge drinking), and these are supported at the local level;
- counselling and mentoring services for young people available across Northern Ireland;
- local education and prevention initiatives addressing those deemed particularly vulnerable to alcohol and drug problem use – e.g. homeless;
- work is also being taken forward regionally on developing action plans to tackle, Young People's Drinking, and "Hidden Harm"; and
- the four local Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs) are implementing their Local Action Plans, which have a particular focus on providing support for community based activities – these action plans have been revised during the course of this year.

- The NSD is a cross-Departmental Strategy, therefore a number of key Departments are represented on the NSD Steering Group. This includes the Northern Ireland Office, the Department for Social Development, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and the Department of Employment and Learning. All these Departments continue to play key role to play in ensuring we meet the long-term outcomes contained in the NSD.
- During the consultation process for the NSD, the Strategy was issued to a range of key stakeholders, including Assembly members, for their comments and input. There is currently no representation from Assembly Members on the NSD Steering Group, and we are not aware of any representation on the local DACT groups.

Hoax Calls to Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many hoax calls were

received by the Fire and Rescue Service in the North Down constituency, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 1858/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is given in the following table:

2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008
153	126	145	81	67

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service publishes a range of statistics, including mobilisation in response to hoax calls, on its website (www.nifrs.org).

Transplant Waiting Lists

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the heart transplant list.
(AQW 1867/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In October 2008 there was 1 Northern Ireland resident on the UK Transplant waiting list for hearts; there were 300 waiting for kidneys ; and 6 were waiting for livers.

Transplant Waiting Lists

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the kidney transplant list.
(AQW 1868/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In October 2008 there was 1 Northern Ireland resident on the UK Transplant waiting list for hearts; there were 300 waiting for kidneys ; and 6 were waiting for livers.

Transplant Waiting Lists

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the liver transplant list.
(AQW 1869/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In October 2008 there was 1 Northern Ireland resident on the UK Transplant waiting list for hearts; there were 300 waiting for kidneys ; and 6 were waiting for livers.

Persons Registered Blind

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many persons are registered blind.
(AQW 1897/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Home Help

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm how many homes are currently receiving home help assistance in the (i) Carrickfergus; and (ii) Larne, areas.
(AQW 1920/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Paediatric Neuromuscular Specialise Clinics

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there are no longer any paediatric neuromuscular specialise clinics in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1923/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for a range of specialised paediatric neurology and neurodisability services, including a multidisciplinary neuromuscular clinic, provided at Belfast City Hospital.

Staffing pressures within the Trust have affected the availability of consultant paediatric neurologists and subsequently the ability to sustain the neuromuscular clinic. Regular clinics have not been held since beginning of September 2008.

Recruitment of an additional paediatric neurologist is underway and interviews are scheduled for 1st December 2008. It is anticipated that the successful applicant will take up post by 1st April 2009.

In the short term, the Trust is currently working to develop interim arrangements to ensure that children who would normally attend the neuromuscular clinic have their needs appropriately met.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children have been born with sexually transmitted infections passed on by their mother, in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 1930/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children born with sexually transmitted infections passed on by their mother, in each of the last 5 years is unavailable.

Lagan Valley Hospital

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of how the review of maternity services will impact on maternity provision at Lagan Valley Hospital.
(AQW 1946/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Eastern Health and Social Services Board to undertake a review of existing maternity capacity in the greater Belfast area. The Board has been asked to work with the Belfast and South Eastern Trusts to identify how inpatient obstetric services should be developed and configured and to detail how consultant-led services will be appropriately supported by specialist paediatric services. The Eastern Board has also been asked to consider the potential for a midwife-led maternity service for the Lisburn area.

The Board will report its findings to my Department early in the New Year.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's strategy for dealing with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder.
(AQW 1980/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Services for attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder are provided by each individual Health and Social Care Board and Trust based on the needs of the populations they serve.

Powers of Attorney

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to replace enduring powers of attorney with lasting powers of attorney; and what consideration he will give to the problems that occurred in England and Wales when lasting powers of attorney was implemented.
(AQW 2009/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following recommendations contained in the Bamford Review, my Department plans to issue in the near future a consultation document on a legislative framework for taking forward new mental capacity and mental health legislation in Northern Ireland. The framework will contain proposals in relation to powers of attorney.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how many final notice demands were issued by Northern Ireland Water this year, despite original bills not having been issued to these customers.
(AQW 1515/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, since 1 April 2008, three final notices were issued in error to non-domestic customers who had not received an initial bill.

Strabane Bus Station

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to (i) revise the opening hours of Strabane Bus Station to provide a service for passengers on Saturdays and Sundays; and (ii) install additional lighting in the vicinity of the station.
(AQW 1583/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: This is an operational matter for Translink. It has advised me that it has no plans to revise the opening hours for Strabane Bus Station or install additional lighting in the vicinity of the station.

Pedestrian Crossing

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development if a pedestrian crossing between the West Winds estate and the Jubilee Road will be constructed on the Newtownards Southern Distributor Road.
(AQW 1709/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the work on the A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor Road will include the provision of a Toucan Crossing. This will be located adjacent to Blenheim Drive and Dakota Avenue, in the West Winds Estate, providing a safe crossing facility for residents. The work will also include a link to a footway which leads on to Jubilee Road.

Car Parks

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total value of the National Car Parks contract; (ii) the total revenue generated since the introduction of the Traffic Attendant system; (iii) the total number of parking meters that have been inoperable since the system's

introduction; and (iv) the average repair time for parking meters. (AQW 1728/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that:

- (i) Since the parking enforcement contract commenced at the end of October 2006, £14.6m has been paid to NCP Services Ltd (NCP) for enforcement services provided, up to the end of August 2008.
- (ii) Roads Service has received £7.75m from payment of Penalty Charge Notices up to the end of September 2008.
- (iii) Since the commencement of the contract with NCP, a total of 354 Pay and Display machines have been inoperable at some stage.
- (iv) NCP is responsible for managing Pay and Display machine faults, including their repair. Performance in this area is measured monthly against a specific contractual key performance indicator (KPI). However, this KPI is not measured by average repair times; instead, it is measured against set response times to reported faults. The stipulated response times for on-street Pay and Display machines in Belfast is 3 hours and for all other Pay and Display machines, it is 24 hours. To meet the required standard, NCP must respond to 98% of reported faults within the above timescales. NCP has failed to meet this KPI on four occasions and in accordance with the contract, performance payments were reduced on each occasion.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development, following the identification of a speeding problem in a specific geographical area, to detail the process followed, including timeframes, for traffic-calming measures to be introduced. (AQW 1736/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service uses established criteria to determine and prioritise locations for the provision of traffic-calming measures.

The assessment procedure takes into consideration various factors to prioritise the many requests received. These include personal injury statistics, the volume and speed of vehicles using the road, environmental factors, such as the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops and public buildings, and whether or not the road in question is used as a through route.

As the demand for road safety measures exceeds Roads Service's capacity to deliver such schemes, the

predetermined criteria enables a priority list of traffic-calming schemes to be established.

Establishing priority lists helps ensure that:

- limited resources are directed to the areas of greatest need;
- value for money is obtained;
- no discrimination is made between Councils, council areas, towns, different areas within towns, etc;
- equality issues are managed; and
- the ultimate dependant factor for schemes is available funding.

When a scheme is proposed, all frontagers directly affected by the proposals are consulted by letter and/or leaflet with an accompanying map outlining the proposed scheme. For larger, complex, or more controversial schemes, it may be more appropriate to meet with local residents groups and/or hold public exhibitions in the affected area.

Statutory notices of intention to proceed with schemes are placed in the local press and at appropriate points on the road, as required by Article 65 of The Roads (NI) Order 1993. If objections are received to the outlined proposals for a traffic-calming scheme on a particular road, Roads Service may not be able to proceed with the scheme's implementation.

There are no specific timeframes for completing the procedure for the introduction of a traffic-calming scheme.

Construction Companies

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of enforcement measures that have been implemented by the Roads Service against construction companies who have not completed roads to adoption standards, in the last 5 years. (AQW 1746/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they have implemented enforcement measures on some 125 occasions, during the last five years, where the construction company has not completed roads to adoption standards.

Sectarian Emblems

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what action his Department has taken in the last 7 months, where sectarian emblems have remained on lamp standards at Friary Road,

on the main thoroughfare from Armagh to Caledon.
(AQW 1755/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service's policy in relation to flags and emblems on its equipment remains unchanged from my reply to you on 8 April 2008 (AQW 5193/08).

Roads Service is a signatory to the Multi Agency Protocol which indicates that the Police Service for Northern Ireland will take the lead where the display of flags or emblems is causing tension, or is having a detrimental affect on the quality of life in a community.

The PSNI would therefore be the appropriate lead agency to contact in the case of Friary Road.

Road-Calming Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the road-calming schemes to be introduced to the North Down constituency, over the next 3 years.
(AQW 1763/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service receives many requests for traffic-calming schemes and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, all proposals are required to be assessed, scored and prioritised within each Council area. Works programmes are then drawn up on an annual basis and are published each year in the Autumn Roads Service Report to Councils. This programme may be subject to change, depending on the assessed priority of new requests for traffic calming.

In relation to 2008/09 financial year, I can advise that Roads Service proposes to provide the following traffic-calming schemes in the North Down Parliamentary constituency:-

- Seahill Road, Holywood;
- Ballymacconnell Road South, Bangor;
- Castle Park Road, Bangor;
- Drumhirk Drive, Bangor;
- Gray's Hill area, Bangor;
- Skipperstone Road/Whitehill area, Bangor;
- Abbey Road, Millisle, and
- Moss Road, Millisle.

These schemes are subject to the successful conclusion of the public consultation and legislative processes.

The locations and the current priority ranking for all the applications being assessed by Roads Service, within the North Down Parliamentary Constituency area, are provided in the table below:

ASSESSMENTS FOR TRAFFIC-CALMING MEASURES IN ROADS SERVICE

Current Priority Ranking	Location	Council Area
3	Groomsport Road, Bangor	North Down
4	Bryansburn Road, Bangor	North Down
5	Old Belfast Road, Bangor	North Down
6	Church View / Spencer Street, Holywood	North Down
7	Brunswick Road, Bangor	North Down
8	Croft Road, Holywood	North Down
9	Central Avenue, Bangor	North Down
18	Willowbrook Park / Road, Bangor	North Down
28	Church Road, Holywood	North Down
29	Sunningdale Park, Bangor	North Down
35	Abbey Ring, Holywood	North Down
48	Shandon Drive, Bangor	North Down
54	Ballyree Drive, Bangor	North Down
55	Loverock Way, Bangor	North Down
65	Innisfayle Drive, Bangor	North Down
66	Thornleigh Gardens, Bangor	North Down
68	Chippendale Avenue, Bangor	North Down
91	Ballyree, Bangor	North Down
97	Princess Gardens, Holywood	North Down
102	Godfrey Avenue, Bangor	North Down
120	Wandsworth Road, Bangor	North Down
133	Farnham Road, Bangor	North Down
145	Marquis Avenue, Bangor	North Down
149	Sandringham Drive, Bangor	North Down
150	Victoria Road, Bangor	North Down
154	Meadowvale, Bangor	North Down
156	Old Quay Road, Holywood	North Down
182	Towerview Crescent, Bangor	North Down
183	Dixon Road / Rossdale Road, Bangor	North Down
200	Churchill Park / Crescent, Bangor	North Down
204	Ruby Street, Bangor	North Down
213	Sherwood Parks, Bangor	North Down
225	Tower Road, Conlig	North Down
229	Coronation Avenue, Conlig	North Down

As further assessments are completed, priorities and plans may change. Therefore, the inclusion

of schemes in future works programmes, at these locations, cannot be guaranteed.

Road Resurfacing Work

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development for a timescale for resurfacing work to be completed on the road between Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert; and what date the road was last inspected by Roads Service. (AQW 1773/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is committed to carrying out further improvements on the road between Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert by completing resurfacing work, the first stage of which is already in place. Unfortunately, there is limited funding for resurfacing work and many schemes are competing for the resources available. Consequently, I am unable to provide you with a definite timescale for when resurfacing on this stretch of road will be completed.

I can confirm that this road is subject to a cyclic inspection regime which identifies defects for repair. The most recent inspection was carried out on 13 October 2008.

Street Works

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail for each of the last five years (i) the total amount paid out in compensation to people who suffered personal injury as a result of street works; and (ii) the number and total amount of financial penalties against sub-contractors as a result of unsatisfactory street works. (AQW 1794/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department has not paid any compensation arising from personal injury sustained during street works. Public utilities and others who wish to undertake street works are responsible for dealing with any compensation claims that arise from their works.

Roads Service does not maintain details of financial penalties against utility sub-contractors, as a result of unsatisfactory street works.

New Park and Ride Facilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any plans for new park and ride facilities in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 1806/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Planned or recent improvements to Park and Ride facilities

at railway stations in the East Antrim constituency include:

- an extension to the Park and Ride facility at Whitehead, to provide an additional 20 spaces from 29 September 2008, at a cost of £151,000;
- ongoing works at Greenisland to provide an extra 72 spaces by March 2009, at a cost of £424,000;
- work at Jordanstown, to provide 61 spaces, at a cost of £544,000, is scheduled to be completed by the summer of 2009; and
- at Whiteabbey, work to provide 57 spaces, at a cost of £477,000, is scheduled to be completed during 2009.

There are also plans, at Feasibility Stage, to provide additional spaces at Carrickfergus Station. The indicative date for completing this work is 2012, assuming the Department approves the project and the necessary funding is available.

Also in Carrickfergus, my Department's Roads Service proposes to provide an additional 236 park and ride spaces for rail users, by the conversion of its existing car park at St Brides. This will form part of the temporary traffic management measures during the road improvement scheme at the A2 Shore Road, Greenisland.

Roads Service is also aware of an increasing demand for a new facility in the Millbrook area of Larne, evidenced by increasing numbers of vehicles being parked in the vicinity of the Millbrook Roundabout. Drivers may be using public transport or sharing lifts from this point. Further investigation will be carried into the feasibility of providing a modest Park and Ride or Park and Share car park at this location. A project will only progress when the level of demand has been determined and the availability of suitable land at this location has been ascertained.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the adjustments that Northern Ireland Water has had to make to its financial accounts; and (ii) the implications of these adjustments. (AQW 1836/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its financial accounts for the year ended 31 March 2008 have been signed, audited and published therefore any potential impact of over/undercharging of customers will be reflected in the financial accounts for the year ending 31 March 2009.

When the accounts are being prepared, consideration will be given to the value of bills which

may have been over/undercharged to reflect their recoverability and any subsequent adjustments.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of bills sent out by Northern Ireland Water that contained errors, over the last two years. (AQW 1839/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that they have identified 2,331 inaccurate bills that were issued in the past two years. This represents 0.7% of the total number of bills sent. All the errors were rectified promptly.

Owing to a specific billing issue relating to incorrect standing charge tariffs, incorrect bills were issued to some 8,200 customers. Northern Ireland Water appeared before the Regional Development Committee to explain how the error occurred and is presently in consultation with the Consumer Council and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation to ensure the matter is resolved fairly and equitably.

Cross-Border Rail Link

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he and his Department have had with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in relation to a cross-border rail link between (i) Derry/Londonderry and Donegal; and (ii) the North West and Dublin. (AQW 1846/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My contacts to date with my counterpart in the South of Ireland regarding cross border rail links have been through the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). At the last NSMC meeting in May 2008, I invited the Council to note:

- the commitment of my Department to improve the railway line from Belfast to Derry;
- that my Department has agreed to undertake a study to consider the long-term social, physical and economic redevelopment of the railway throughout the North/West;
- that once the study is complete its findings will be brought to a meeting of NSMC in Transport Sectoral format and at that stage consideration may be given to a study into improved public transport links with Donegal.

At the same meeting, the NSMC received a joint presentation from NIR and Ianrod Eireann setting out an initial consideration of short and medium term options for improving frequency on the Belfast to Dublin service.

The two rail companies were asked by Ministers to expand upon the work undertaken to date and to prepare a business case. The joint proposal is due to be discussed at the next NSMC meeting scheduled for November 2008.

Proposed Bridges Scheme

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development what (i) the current position is of Monaghan County Council's proposed Annaghroe and Knockaginny Blackwater bridges schemes; (ii) cost benefit analyses have now been undertaken; (iii) plans he has for access roads from Northern Ireland; (iv) environmental impact assessments he has carried out; and (v) consultations he has had about this with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Garda Siochana. (AQW 1852/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the initial design work on the reinstatement of the Annaghroe and Knockaginny bridges has been completed. Planning applications are currently being considered by Monaghan County Council and the Department of the Environment's Planning Service.

As indicated in the response to the Member's previous Assembly Question AQW 5670/08, all the bridge reinstatement costs will be paid by the Irish Government. Therefore, a cost benefit analysis is not required to be undertaken by my Department.

The widths of the running surface on the Annaghroe Road and Knockaginny Road are approximately 5m and 3.5m respectively. These widths will be increased over short distances on the approaches to the bridges to 6m over Annaghroe Bridge and 5.5m over Knockaginny Bridge. Following requests from local landowners it is also proposed to provide passing bays on the Knockaginny Road.

Consultations between the bridge designers and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) are on going and an Environmental Assessment regarding the proposals has been submitted. As part of the planning process, Planning Service will also undertake consultations with the NIEA.

Roads Service has had no consultations with the PSNI or Garda Siochana on the reinstatement of the bridges.

Traffic Flows

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average daily traffic flows for the A2 Bangor to Belfast road. (AQW 1860/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are four automatic traffic counting sites located on the A2 between Bangor and Belfast. The table below details the Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) for these four locations.

Census Point Number	Location	AADT	Year of Census	Comments
209	Sydenham By-Pass at City Airport	61931	2007	
501	Hollywood By-Pass	47793	2007	
502	Cultra	41375	2007	
505	Springhill	26526	2007	5 months data only

Automated Announcements on NIR Trains

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has plans to remove the gender specific automated announcements on NIR trains, on which the conductor is referred to as 'he'.

(AQW 1861/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Tanslink are bound by relevant equality legislation and have informed me that this issue has not previously been raised with them. Translink also indicated that there is a limited amount of time in which to make such announcements and that they currently follow normal terminology when relaying such passenger information. However, they will look at the practicalities of this suggestion the next time they are due to record new announcements.

Traffic Volume

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide the latest available daily traffic volume figures for the Jubilee Road in Newtownards.

(AQW 1862/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it collects data from approx 300 automatic traffic counting sites located throughout the North's road network. I can advise the member that none of the automatic traffic counting sites are currently situated on the Jubilee Road, Newtownards. Therefore, it is not possible to provide the current average daily traffic flows for this road.

Executive Meetings

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what departmental business is being held up by the failure of the Executive to meet.

(AQW 1865/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: It is not my practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers, including draft papers, is confidential.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if site meetings will still be available for elected representatives should the Northern Ireland Water office at Conlig close.

(AQW 1877/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that after the closure of the office in Conlig, site meetings will now be available at NIW's Head Office at Northland House in Belfast or other offices across the North. Officials will also be available to meet at other locations if required.

Commuter Parking

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact on residents in areas outside Belfast caused by all-day commuter parkers.

(AQW 1880/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that the problems created by all-day commuter parking are not restricted to those particular areas of Belfast, named in my announcement of 21 October. My Department's Roads Service is also considering requests for Residents Parking Schemes from a number of other locations across the North, which includes areas of Derry.

Commuter Parking

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration was given to including areas of Derry/Londonderry that are affected by all-day commuter parking in the free Residents Car Parking Scheme announced on 21 October 2008.

(AQW 1881/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that the problems created by all-day commuter parking are not restricted to those particular areas of Belfast, named in my announcement of 21 October. My Department's Roads Service is also considering

requests for Residents Parking Schemes from a number of other locations across the North, which includes areas of Derry.

Commuter Parking

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to outline the process of evaluation which determined the five areas most heavily affected by commuter parking; (ii) to detail the criteria applied in that evaluation; and (iii) what areas were measured in the exercise. (AQW 1882/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan published in 2004 addressed the issue of car parking and demand management within the Greater Belfast area and includes details of a number of measures to be introduced in the City Centre Core Zone and City Centre Fringe Zone. Residents' Parking Schemes, to limit the availability of all-day commuter parking places, is identified as one such measure to be introduced in these zones.

The initial effort has been concentrated in those areas within the Belfast City Centre Core Zone where the problems experienced by residents are considered to be the most acute. The five schemes being progressed are Barrack Street, Brown's Square, Donegall Pass, Sandy Row and The Markets (west of Cromac Street). These were selected in the mid/late 1990s on the basis of representations from public representatives and community groups indicating significant local support, which is considered essential for the successful introduction of such schemes.

Residents Parking Schemes

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) when the monitoring and assessment period for the free Residents Car Parking Scheme announced on 21 October 2008 will be completed; and (ii) when the findings of that exercise will be made known. (AQW 1883/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Whilst I have amended the policy to make the residents permits free, it should be noted that before a scheme can be implemented, a Traffic Regulation Order has to be made which is advertised to allow for representations. This process can take up to 12 months.

Roads Service will assess the effectiveness of these Residents Parking Schemes when the new parking arrangements have had a chance to bed in. This will give sufficient time for residents groups and local businesses within the areas to form an opinion on the operation of the schemes. The assessment will also

include parking surveys which will determine the level of illegal parking and availability of parking spaces.

Residents Parking Schemes

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development if an equality impact assessment was carried out on the introduction of the free Residents Car Parking Scheme that is limited to five areas in Belfast, as announced on 21 October 2008. (AQW 1885/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's policy for the introduction of Residents, Parking Schemes was published in January 2008 following a full public consultation. Part of the policy development process included the completion of a screening analysis to determine if a full Equality Impact Assessment should be carried out. This screening analysis indicated that the introduction of the policy would not have any differential impact on any of the Section 75 groups, therefore the policy was screened out.

The screening analysis also attracted no comments when it was included in the public consultation document.

The change to the original policy, which I announced on 21 October 2008, simply removed the proposed charge for residents' permits. This applies to the policy as a whole and not just to schemes in Belfast. There are, therefore, no equality impact implications.

Monitoring Reports

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 286/09, to detail (i) the locations for which monitoring reports were produced for each year between April 1999 and April 2003; (ii) the locations where monitoring reports will be produced for the period April 2003 and April 2008; and (iii) the methodology used to monitor the effectiveness of respective forms of traffic calming. (AQW 1892/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The tables below detail the locations, broken down by division, for which my Department's Roads Service produced monitoring reports, relating to traffic-calming schemes, in each financial year from April 1999 to March 2003.

FINANCIAL YEAR 1999/2000

Northern Division	
Creggan, Derry (Phase 1)	Laurelhill Road, Coleraine
Rosville Street/Lecky Road, Derry	Windyhill Estate, Coleraine

Steeple Road/Old Steeple Road Oriel Road, Antrim	Portglenone Road, Randalstown
Castlecatt Road, Bushmills	Old Strabane Road, Derry
Southern Division	
Windmill Road, Armagh	Lawrencetown
Redmonville, Portadown	Hilltown
Park Road, Portadown	Armagh Road, Newry
Aghacommon Village	Newcastle Road, Castlewellan
Folly Lane, Armagh	Killough Road, Downpatrick
Eastern Division	
Alexandra Park Avenue, Belfast	Anahilt, Lisburn
Ballybeen, Dundonald (Phase 1)	Pembroke Loop, Lisburn
Belvoir Drive, Castlereagh	Glenbawn Avenue, Lisburn
Donegall Park Avenue, Belfast	Summerhill Road, Lisburn
Mallusk Road, Newtownabbey	Donaghadee Road, Bangor
Island Street, Belfast	Owenroe Drive, Bangor
Tennant Street Area, Belfast	
Western Division	
Aughnacloy, Co. Tyrone	Kesh, Co. Fermanagh
Ballycolman Road/Ballymount Avenue, Strabane	

FINANCIAL YEAR 2000/01

Northern Division	
Ann Street, Ballycastle	Rosemount Avenue & Gardens, Derry
Ballybogey, Ballymoney	Carnhill, Derry
Burnfoot Village	Westway, Derry
Dungiven	Wakehurst Area, Harryville
Feeny Village	
Southern Division	
A2 Millisle	A20 Main Street, Kircubbin
Blackwatertown Village, Co Armagh	Vianstown Road, Downpatrick
Coolmillish Road, Markethill	Castlewellan Road, Clough
Silverwood Drive, Lurgan	
Eastern Division	
Ardoyne Avenue, Belfast	Turf Lodge (Monagh Road), Belfast
Bloomfield Road, Bangor	Twaddell Avenue, Belfast
Elmfield Road, Belfast	Windermere Road, Carrickfergus
Gardenmore Road, Twinbrook	Newtown Park, Belfast
Longlands Road, Belfast	Edenmore Drive Area, Belfast

Summerhill Drive, Twinbrook	Ballybeen, Dundonald (Phase 2)
Western Division	
A4 Gateways - Fivemiltown & Aughur	Strathroy Estate, Omagh
Dungannon Road, Moy	

FINANCIAL YEAR 2001/02

Northern Division	
Lisnablagh Road/Tullyarton Road, Coleraine	Racecourse Road (Ballyarnett), Derry
Crebilly Road, Ballymena	Glen Road, Derry
Mountsandal Road, Coleraine	Glebeside, Ballymoney
Kells/Connor	Armoy Village
Strathfoyle, Derry	Tobar Park/Kilmakevitt, Cullybackey
Edenmore Road, Limavady	Ballymoney Village
Rosstowney Road, Derry	Dowland Road, Limavady
Southern Division	
Knockcree Avenue, Kilkeel	Aghagallon Village
Rooney Road, Kilkeel	Killicommaine, Portadown
Saul Road, Downpatrick	Victoria Street, Lurgan
Castlewellan Road, Newcastle	Obins Street, Portadown
Elmwood/Beechmount Parks, Newry	Newfordge Road, Magheralin
Mullacreevie Estate	Drumaness Village
Eastern Division	
Suffolk Road, Belfast	Lisburn Gateways - Glenavy
Lenadoon, Belfast (Area 2)	Bryansburn Road, Bangor
Joanmount Area, Belfast	Oldpark Avenue, Belfast
Ballysillan Park, Belfast	Ashgrove Road, Glengormley
Ballysillan Area, Belfast	Braniel Square, Castlereagh
Jamaica Street/Road, Belfast	Braniel Square, Castlereagh (Phase 2)
Atlantic Avenue, Belfast	St. James Road Area, Belfast
Beechfield Street/ Mountpottinger Link, Belfast	Glenbane Avenue, Rathcoole, Newtownabbey
Ballynafeigh, Belfast	Clonduff Drive Area, Castlereagh
Summerhill Road, Twinbrook	
Western Division	
Lisnabull Estate, Dungannon	Derrygonnelly Village
Glebe, Sion Mills	A29, Swatragh & Tobermore Villages
Carlton Drive, Strabane	

FINANCIAL YEAR 2002/03

Northern Division	
Ballycraig Road/Linn Road/ Killyglen Road, Larne	Circular Road/Iniscarn Road/ Lislane Drive, Derry
Ballee Estate, Ballymena	Trench Road, Derry
Rasharkin and Dunloy	Beechwood Avenue, Derry
Newpark Estate, Antrim	Currynierin, Drumahoe
Ballysally	Drumleck Road, Derry
Southern Division	
Orangefield Estate, Armagh	West Winds Estate, Newtownards
Drumarg/Dalton Park Estates, Armagh	Darragh Road, Newtownards
Middletown Village	Crawfordsburn Road, Newtownards
Gilford Village	Bangor Road, Newtownards
Brownstown East Estate, Portadown	Glenard Road, Newtownards
Flying Horse Road, Downpatrick	Meigh Village
Downpatrick Road, Ardglass	Barrack Street, Newry
Eastern Division	
Glandore Avenue, Belfast	Lisburn Gateways- Dromara
Lansdowne Road, Belfast	New Mossley, Newtownabbey
Bloomfield, Belfast	Rashee Road, Ballyclare
Rosebery Road, Belfast	Cregagh Estate, Belfast
Mountainhill Road, Belfast	Sunnylands, Carrickfergus
Old Warren Estate, Lisburn	Oakfield Drive, Carrickfergus
Tonagh Estate, Lisburn	Knockfergus Park, Greenisland
Lisburn Gateways- Maghaberry	Northlands, Belfast
Western Division	
Dromore Road, Omagh	Townsend Street, Strabane
Derry Road, Omagh	Coalisland
Beragh	Draperstown
Omagh Road, Carrickmore	Straw Village, Draperstown
Lisnafin Estate, Strabane	Kilmacormick 1 Estate, Enniskillen

The tables below detail the locations, broken down by division, for which my Department's Roads Service will produce monitoring reports, relating to traffic-calming schemes, in each financial year from April 2003 to March 2007.

FINANCIAL YEAR 2003/04

Northern Division	
Lower Greystone Road, Antrim	Edenmore Road, Limavady
Glendun and Dunclog Areas, Ballymena	Nelson Drive Estate, Derry
Dervock Village	Lettershandoney
Demesne Estate, Ballymena	Glenbank/Glenside Road, Derry
Lough Road, Antrim	Fernabbey, Derry
Millburn, Coleraine	
Southern Division	
Ardglass Road/Ballyhornan Road, Downpatrick	Carnaget Road, Newry
Ballyduggan Road, Downpatrick	Brownlow Terrace, Lurgan
Dublin Road/Castlewellan Road, Kilcoo	Old Portadown Road, Lurgan
Shrigley Road, Killyleagh	Wood Lane, Lurgan
Bowtown Road/Greenwell Street, Newtownards	West Street, Portadown
Cloghy Road, Portaferry	Fitzgerald Park, Portadown
Ballygowan Road, Comber	Scarva Village, Banbridge
Movilla Road/Abbot Drive, Newtownards	Primrose Gardens, Banbridge
Drumalane/Fathom Line, Newry	Iveagh Drive, Banbridge
Church Street, Rostrevor	Hamiltonsbawn, Armagh
Belfast Road, Newry	New Line, Richill
Summerhill, Warrenpoint	Alexander Park, Armagh
Eastern Division	
Willowfield/Carlingford Street Area, Belfast	Springfield-Forfar, Belfast
Lower Ormeau, Belfast	Forthriver, Belfast
Willowholme Area, Belfast	Grays Lane, Belfast
Park Road/North-South Parade, Belfast	Fortwilliam Park, Belfast
Orchardville Area - Finaghy, Belfast	Serpentine Road, Belfast
Abbey Road-Ardcarn Area, Belfast	Brookvale-Cliftonville Area, Belfast
Aylesbury Road Area, Belfast	Conway/Canmore Area, Belfast
Deerpark Road, Belfast	Gilnahirk Road, Belfast
Ainsworth/Woodvale Area, Belfast	Lagmore, Lisburn
Clifton Park Avenue, Belfast	Bell Steel/Brian's Well Road, Dunmurry
Manor Street Area, Belfast	Fernagh Road Area, Newtownabbey

Beechmount Avenue, Belfast	Doagh Village
Western Division	
Meeting House Avenue, Maghera	Ratheen Drive, Cookstown
Bellaghy	Hospital Road, Omagh (Phase 1)
Castlederg	Altmore Drive, Dungannon

FINANCIAL YEAR 2004/05

Northern Division	
Ballycraig Road, Antrim	Mosside
Toome Village	Cushendall
Ballymena Town Centre (Ballymoney Street)	Kilfennan Link Road, Derry
Armour Avenue, Ballymoney	Creggan Broadway and side streets, Derry
Moss, Galliagh, Fergleen and Bracken Parks, Derry	Heron Way, Lapwing Way, Emerson Street, Derry
Castleroe, Coleraine	Carnlough Village
Drumagarner, Kilrea	Brandywell Road and Lecky Road, Derry
Greysteel Village	
Southern Division	
Ashgrove, Newry	A29 Railway Street, Armagh
Greyabbey	Irish Street, Armagh
Cloughreagh Park Bessbrook	Umgola Road, Armagh
Moss Road, Ballygowan	Banbridge Road, Kinallen
Old Belfast Road, Downpatrick	Ballygowan Road, Banbridge
Lisbane	Lurgan Road, Dromore
High Bangor Road, Donaghadee	Banbridge Road, Dromore
Ballywhiskin	Francis Street, Lurgan
Brentwood Way, Newtownards	Old Portadown Road, Lurgan
Balloo	B2 Wolf Island Terrace, Derrymacash
Dromore Road, Ballynahinch	Charles Street, Portadown
Spa Village	Pollock Drive & Mourne View Drive, Lurgan
A29 Armagh Road, Keady	
Eastern Division	
Fruithill/Glenhill Park, Belfast	Highfield Drive, Belfast
St Meryl Park/Anderstown Park, Belfast	Melfort Drive, Tullycarnet, Belfast
Dunmisk Park, Slemish Way etc, Belfast	Killynure Road, Carryduff
Orby Drive Area, Belfast	Milltown Avenue, Belfast

Willowvale Avenue/Suffolk Crescent, Belfast	Aghalee Village
Ladybrook Crescent, Belfast	Pembroke Loop Road, Dunmurry
Ardgowan Street, Belfast	Drumbo Village, Drumbo
Lower Serpentine Road Area (Glenhurst), Belfast	Monkstown Estate (Devenish Drive), Newtownabbey
Highbury Gardens area, Belfast	Ballyduff Road, Newtownabbey
Henderson Avenue, Belfast	Ballycrochan Road Area, Bangor (Stage 1)
St James Park, Belfast	Ballycrochan Road Area, Bangor (Stage 2)
Salisbury Avenue/Hughenden Area, Belfast	Crawfordsburn Village
White City, Belfast	Bloomfield Road South, Bangor
Wilgar Street, Belfast	Prospect Road, Bangor
Kansas Avenue etc, Belfast	Godfrey Avenue, Bangor
Western Division	
Killen	Ballyronan Road, Magherafelt
Coa Road, Enniskillen	Knockloughrim
Ballinamallard	Clady
Windmill Housing area, Dungannon	Trasna Way, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh
Coagh Village	

FINANCIAL YEAR 2005/06

Northern Division	
Parkhall Road, Antrim	Ballystrudder Village, Islandmagee
Durnish Road, Antrim	Kilrea
Warden Street, Suffolk Street and Fisherwick Gardens, Ballymena	Killowen Street, Kyles Brae & Shuttle Hill, Coleraine
Chichester Park & Moat Road, Ballymena	Galliagh, Derry (Phase 2)
Ballymena Town Centre (Mill Street)	Lonemoor Road, Derry
Cloughmills Village	Hatmore Park, Kylemore Park, Derry
Carncastle Village	
Southern Division	
Tullybrannigan, Newcastle	Churchill Park, Portadown
Chancellors Road South, Newry	Sloan Street, Lurgan
Ballylough Road, Annsborough	Lake Street, Lurgan
Carrowdore	Gilford Road, Portadown
Scrabo Estate, Newtownards	Ashgrove Road, Portadown

High Street, Newry	Callenbridge Road/Nursery Road, Armagh
Milltown Road, Burren	Darkley Road, Keady
Old Warrenpoint Road, Newry	Portadown Road, Tandragee
Ballymartin	Meeting Street, Dromore
Killycomaine Drive, Portadown	Gallows Street, Dromore
Eastern Division	
Springfield Park, Belfast	Burnthill/Richmond Area, Newtownabbey
Ballyhenry/Glenvarna, Newtownabbey	Queens Park, Newtownabbey
Carnvue Road, Newtownabbey	Knockeden/Flush, Belfast
Mayfair, Belfast	Fairview Road, Newtownabbey
Rathgill Park, Bangor	Conlig Village
Stoneyford Village	Mount Merrion Avenue, Belfast
Netwownbreda Village	Culcavy Village
Sunnyside Street, Belfast	Colinbridge Area, Newtownabbey (Advisory 20 mph)
Cavehill Road, Belfast	Godfrey Avenue, Bangor
Rathmore Drive, Rathcoole	Upper Whiterock Road, Belfast
Glengoland Estate, Belfast	Iris Drive, Belfast
Inverary Area, Belfast	Westland Road, Belfast
Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	Moneyreagh Village
Highfield Drive Area, Belfast	Alfred Street area, Belfast
Western Division	
Pomeroy	Springhill Park, Strabane
Stewartstown	Lack
Killyman	Kesh
Moygashel	Brookmount Road, Omagh
Sion Mills	

FINANCIAL YEAR 2006/07

Northern Division	
Cullybackey Village	Edenmore Road from Greystone to Mounteden
Crumlin Village	Church Road, Drumahoe (Phase 1)
Gracehill Village	Elmwood Street/Cable Street, Derry
Southern Division	
Killough	Drumnacanvy Village
Saintfield	Meadowbrook, Craigavon
Portaferry	Mill Hill, Waringstown
Railway Street, Comber	Poyntzpass Village

Movilla Street, Newtownards	Scarva Street, Banbridge
Harbour Road, Kilkeel	Lawrencetown Village
Newry Road, Kilkeel	Moneyslane Village
Bridal Loanan, Warrenpoint	
Eastern Division	
Burnside Village	Knockenagh Avenue, Newtownabbey
Ballyeaston Village	Cashel Drive, Newtownabbey
Harberton Park, Belfast	Carnhill Road, Newtownabbey
Moss Road, Newtownabbey	Knockmore Estate, Lisburn
Gransha Road, Bangor	Looiland Park, Belfast
Duncairn Gardens, Belfast	Ballyliddy Village
Erinvale Avenue, Belfast	Dunraven Park area, Belfast
Benmore Drive, Belfast	Downshire Road, Belfast
Backwood Road, Moira	Burney's Lane, Newtownabbey
Cranley Road, Bangor	Cupar Street Upper, Belfast
Western Division	
Castlecaulfield, Dungannon	Carrickmore, Omagh
Ballycolman, Strabane (Phase 2)	Coleshill & Rossorry Church Road, Enniskillen
Brackaville Road, Coalisland	Draperstown/Straw, Magheratelt
Brookeborough, Fermanagh	Tirkane Road & Parks, Maghera
Carland Road, Dungannon	Windmill Heights, Enniskillen

Details for the financial year 2007/08 have not, as yet, been collated by Roads Service.

Monitoring of scheme impact is part of the overall assessment of the Traffic-Calming Scheme effectiveness. These impact assessments are carried out over a three year period following the completion of the scheme, when the collision history involving vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists, is monitored.

Carland Bridge Scheme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development when the Carland Bridge scheme, and the associated works along Mulnagore Road and Anaghquin Road in the Cookstown District Council area, are due to start. (AQW 1893/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the A29 Carland Bridge Realignment scheme and associated works at Mulnagore Road and Anaghquin Road are expected to commence on site during April or May 2009.

Capital and Maintenance Budgets

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the (i) capital budgets; and (ii) maintenance budgets, for the (a) Dungannon; (b) Cookstown; and (c) Magherafelt District Council areas. (AQW 1895/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The tables below detail the capital budget allocations for Major Works and Network Development for 2008/09, shown by relevant Council area:-

MAJOR WORKS

Council	Scheme	2008/09 Budget Allocation* £k
Dungannon	A4/A5 Improvements (A4 Annaghilla and A5 Tullyvar).	2000
	A29 Carland Bridge Improvement.	250
Cookstown	A29 Cookstown Eastern Distributor.	550
Magherafelt	A6 Dualling – M22 to Castledawson Roundabout.	750
	A31 Magherafelt Bypass.	850

* Allocation subject to change throughout the financial year.

NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

Council	Local Transport Safety Measures £k	Bridge Strengthening £k	Street Lighting £k
Dungannon	780	213	90
Cookstown	465	24	50
Magherafelt	535	113	60

I can advise the Member that Roads Service does not apportion its maintenance budget equally across District Council areas. Resources available for each maintenance activity (resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting, etc) are apportioned to District Council areas using appropriate indicators of need. This helps to ensure an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of the North. Therefore, District Council analysis is performed on the actual maintenance expenditure, after the end of the financial year.

Introduction of 20 mph Zones

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the areas in Ards Borough Council where 20 mph zones are being planned. (AQW 1896/09)

The Minister for Regional Development:

My Department's Roads Service has advised that current guidance permits the introduction of 20 mph zones in residential areas only in cases where such limits are clearly self enforcing and where there is agreement with the PSNI. Experience shows that 20 mph zones in residential areas are ineffective without also implementing traffic-calming measures.

While a 20 mph zone has already been introduced in the Scrabo Estate, Newtownards, there are currently no plans to introduce any further schemes in the Ards Council area.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what work Northern Ireland Water plans to carry out to alleviate flood problems in (i) 2008/9; (ii) 2009/10; and (iii) 2010/11. (AQW 1907/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it plans to invest approximately £80 million during 2008/09 and a further £45 million during 2009/10 on improvements to the sewerage network system throughout the North. The alleviation of flooding will be a major beneficiary of this level of investment. Areas targeted for improvement include Ballycastle, Portrush and Coleraine.

Any projects planned for 2010/11 will depend on the outcome of the price control review in 2010, following which a prioritised programme of capital work will be developed.

Installation of Street Lighting

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the installation of street lighting from the Coast Road in Larne to the Black arch at Drainsbay. (AQW 1921/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that due to the nature and location of the Black Arch at Drainsbay, it has been agreed with Larne Borough Council to install, on a pilot basis, low level street lighting which requires specialist equipment. This equipment has been ordered and delivery is expected within the next four to six weeks.

When the equipment has been received there will be an initial stage of installation and assessment prior to full completion of the scheme.

Roads Service

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development what mechanisms does Roads Service have in place to ensure that all aggregates being supplied to its projects have the appropriate levy paid on them. (AQW 1925/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service adopts the use of certificates, audit procedures, and random checks to ensure that the appropriate levy is paid on virgin aggregates. These measures ensure that:

- signed certificates are included in contract documents, confirming that aggregates are to be sourced from registered suppliers;
- Contractors confirm details of aggregate suppliers and their registration numbers at project meetings, or at regular intervals;
- random on-site checking of suppliers at source are carried out at a frequency commensurate with the risk factors for the project; and
- infractions by Contractors are recorded in Contractor Performance Reports.

While it is accepted that Roads Service does not have direct responsibility to regulate this levy, it nevertheless is important to my Department to do all that is reasonably practical to ensure compliance.

Vesting Land at Harbour Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development why there has been a delay, of over three years, in vesting land at Harbour Road, Ballyhalbert to widen and improve the road. (AQW 1932/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they are not currently vesting, or have any plans to vest, any land at Harbour Road, Ballyhalbert.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development why properties in Belfast that are owned by Northern Ireland Water are being sold when contracts on properties leased by the organisation are being extended. (AQW 1933/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it occupies seven properties in or near Belfast City Centre. Two of these properties are owned by Northern Ireland Water and neither are being sold. The remaining properties are leased. One of the leased properties which belongs

to a private owner, is being sold with Northern Ireland Water as sitting tenant until 2012.

Traffic Flows

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average daily traffic flow for (i) the Rathgael Road; and (ii) the Balloo Road, Bangor. (AQW 1966/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it collects data from approx 300 automatic traffic counting sites located throughout the North's road network. Roads Service has advised that there is one automatic traffic counting site located on the Rathgael Road. Unfortunately there is no automatic traffic counting site currently situated on the Balloo Road, Bangor. Therefore, it is not possible to provide the current average daily flow for this road.

With regard to AQW 1967/09 I can advise that Roads Service has one automatic traffic counting site located on the Bangor Ring Road.

The table below details the latest Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) for Rathgael Road and Bangor Ring Road, for which records are available.

Census Point Number	Location	AADT	Year of Census
504	Rathgael Road, Bangor	16014	2006
506	Ring Road, Bangor	22877	2006

Traffic Flows

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average daily traffic flow for the Ring Road in Bangor. (AQW 1967/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it collects data from approx 300 automatic traffic counting sites located throughout the North's road network. Roads Service has advised that there is one automatic traffic counting site located on the Rathgael Road. Unfortunately there is no automatic traffic counting site currently situated on the Balloo Road, Bangor. Therefore, it is not possible to provide the current average daily flow for this road.

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504	Rathgael Road, Bangor	16014	2006
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Road Safety Schemes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many road safety schemes, with flashing warning lights, have been completed for schools in the North Down constituency. (AQW 1968/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is committed to installing road safety facilities outside schools as part of the Travelwise Safer Routes to Schools initiative. This typically involves providing flashing school warning signs and enhanced road safety features near schools. Locations are prioritised taking into account, the history of collisions leading to personal injury, volume and speeds of vehicles on the road in question, as well as other factors, such as existing road features near the school.

I can advise that under this initiative, Roads Service has provided flashing school warning signs at four schools in the North Down constituency in the last 3 years, namely: Sullivan Upper High School, Belfast Road, Holywood; Glenlola Primary School, Bloomfield Road, Bangor; Redburn Primary School, Old Holywood Road, Holywood; and St Comgall's Primary School, Brunswick Road, Bangor.

Ballyhalbert High Street

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when the final surface will be put down on High Street, Ballyhalbert; and why the original timescale was delayed. (AQW 1978/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Mr Department's Roads Service has confirmed that the final wearing course resurfacing on High Street, Ballyhalbert will be laid before the end of the current financial year.

This work was delayed to facilitate the construction of the new primary school. I am sure the member will appreciate that by rescheduling this work, Roads Service has ensured that utility connections for the new school, which will require excavations and reinstatements, are not carried out on a newly surfaced carriageway.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons why Northern Ireland Water has underestimated its income; and what action he is taking to prevent a reoccurrence of this. (AQW 1979/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has not underestimated its income. It has informed my Department that new reporting systems, which are supporting more accurate forecasting and monitoring along with continuous improvement in billing data, have indicated a potential shortfall in income of £5 million to £7 million compared to the original 2008/09 budget estimate. The projections are complicated by factors such as the impact on consumption of the unseasonably wet weather, a downturn in the housing market and difficult economic conditions. There are also reservations about the quality of some of the data used. It should be noted that the level of variance, which is less than 10% of annual budgeted income, is not unprecedented in the water industry.

Northern Ireland Water is currently carrying out a further analysis, which is due to be completed by the end of November. This analysis has the benefit of a further 8 months data and should provide a more reliable income projection.

Northern Ireland Water has assured me that, as it reinforces its data quality and consolidates the new reporting systems, the accuracy of forecasting will continue to improve.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Home Improvement Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the new Housing Executive home improvement schemes for the Silverstream area of Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1469/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The Housing Executive does not own any properties in the Silverstream area of Bangor.

Home Improvement Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the new Housing Executive home improvement schemes for the Clondeboye area of Bangor, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1470/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has an external cyclical maintenance scheme programmed for the financial year 2010/11 for 52 properties in the Clandeboyne area of Bangor.

Shared Neighbourhood Programme

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she is giving to the designation of all, or part, of the Loughview/Redburn Estate in Holywood as a shared future housing area. (AQW 1498/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I recently launched the Shared Neighbourhood Programme that will involve 30 existing estates over the next three years being designated as a Shared Future Neighbourhood.

The first five neighbourhoods for year one (2008) of the programme have already been announced and significant progress is being made towards identifying the next twenty five neighbourhoods for inclusion in years 2 (2009) and 3 (2010) of the programme.

I am happy to confirm that Loughview/Redburn will be considered in a future phase of this programme.

Home Improvement Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has for Housing Executive Home Improvement schemes in the Abbey Garden area of Millisle, over the next 3 years. (AQW 1534/09)

The Minister for Social Development: One scheme, for heating replacement in 9 dwellings at Abbey Gardens Millisle, is planned to start in April 2009.

New Window Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development (i) when the new window scheme for the Glen Estate, Newtownards, will be started and completed; and (ii) to give the reasons for the delay. (AQW 1560/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I refer the Member to the answer I gave him in response to AQW 1123/09. There are no delays with these schemes; they are programmed to start as previously outlined.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications have been made to the Warm Homes Scheme from (i) the Ards Borough

Council area; and (ii) the Strangford constituency, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1606/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of applications made to the Warm Homes Scheme in 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08 from Ards Borough Council and Strangford Constituency is as follows:

APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

	Ards Council	Strangford Constituency
01/04/05 to 31/03/06	318	463
01/04/06 to 31/03/07	532	667
01/04/07 to 31/03/08	594	734

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development why there have been delays in allocating money from the Warm Homes Scheme in (i) the Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) the Strangford constituency. (AQW 1607/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Scheme has become a victim of its own success. The popularity of the Scheme has caused waiting lists to develop in recent years. In order to reduce the waiting list I instructed Eaga plc to introduce prioritisation measures to ensure that those people in greatest need will be assisted first. Applicants with no central heating, solid fuel or Economy 7 are now treated as a priority. Applications are processed on a priority basis and not on a borough council or constituency basis.

My officials have finalised the changes to the Warm Homes Scheme and these are now the subject of public consultation. The consultation exercise will run until 19 December 2008.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been allocated under the Warm Homes Scheme to applicants in (i) the Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) Strangford constituency. (AQW 1608/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the total spend on heating and insulation measures in Ards Borough Council and Strangford Constituency from the Warm Homes Scheme began in 2001 until 31 March 2008.

TOTAL MEASURE SPEND

	Ards Council	Strangford Constituency
Years 1-7 (ending 31/03/2008)	£2,330,845.48	£2,909,203.90

Newbuild Social House

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what is the average cost of a newbuild social house. (AQW 1623/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has just completed a review of the 'Total Cost Indicators' associated with the Social Housing Development Programme.

Whilst costs vary from scheme to scheme, the average cost of a newbuild, 5 person, 3 bedroom house (the benchmark unit) is currently £163,000.

Time Spent at Department's Headquarters

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many full days she has spent at her Department's headquarters since taking up office. (AQW 1637/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My duties as an Executive Minister often require me to be present at Stormont on plenary days and for other Executive-related and committee business. In addition, outside visits and meetings are an important feature of my schedule and allow me to meet as wide a range of people as possible and to see for myself the important work that is being done by individuals, groups and communities across Northern Ireland.

Since taking office I have spent all or part of 144 days at my Department's headquarters building, including 15 when I did not have any outside meetings or other engagements.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she has given to bringing the Warm Homes Scheme into line with a similar scheme in England. (AQW 1663/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme is broadly similar to the Warm Front Scheme in England but it takes account of the unique circumstances which face householders in Northern Ireland. The Warm Homes Scheme has been the

subject of a Northern Ireland Audit Office report and more recently a Public Accounts Committee hearing. Taking on board the recommendations made by the Audit Office I have proposed a number of changes to the Warm Homes Scheme. These proposed changes are now the subject of a public consultation exercise which will run until 19 December. A new Warm Homes Scheme will be introduced from 1 April 2009.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if socially beneficial conditions were included in the criteria for the Dove Gardens scheme, Derry/Londonderry, contract selection process; and if not to detail the reasons. (AQW 1673/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Socially beneficial conditions were not included in the criteria for the Dove Gardens scheme.

The reason for this was the Dove Gardens scheme was advertised on 23 October 2007. This was prior to the publication in May 2008 when the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Central Procurement Directorate issued guidance on how equality of opportunity and sustainable development may be integrated into public procurement.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development, if socially beneficial conditions were included in the criteria for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry, (i) what weighting was given to them; (ii) what evidence the prospective bidders provided to support their record on this; and (iii) how the successful bidder provided this evidence. (AQW 1674/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Socially beneficial conditions were not included in the criteria for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development, if socially beneficial outcomes were included in the contract for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry, what strategy her Department proposed to (i) those registering expressions of interest; and (ii) the Central Procurement Directorate, to identify social need, and to use the contract to meet that need. (AQW 1676/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Socially beneficial outcomes were not included in the contract for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry.

In May 2008, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Central Procurement Directorate issued guidance on how equality of opportunity and sustainable development may be integrated into public procurement. However, the Dove Gardens scheme was advertised in October 2007, prior to the issue of the guidance.

People Visually Impaired

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Social Development what benefits are available to people registered as (i) partially sighted; and (ii) visually impaired. (AQW 1685/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Depending on the individual circumstances a range of social security benefits is available to people registered as partially sighted or visually impaired including disability living allowance, attendance allowance, employment and support allowance, incapacity benefit and income-related benefits, such as income support and pension credit.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department made a proposal to the Central Procurement Directorate on the nature of socially beneficial conditions, linked to needs assessment and the numbers of those who could benefit, in relation to the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 1688/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Socially beneficial conditions were not included in the criteria for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry. Therefore no proposal was made to the Central Procurement Directorate on this issue.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department was aware that it could construct its proposal for Dove Gardens in Derry/ Londonderry based on need before taking advice from the Central Procurement Directorate. (AQW 1691/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Procurement Board approved Equality of Opportunity and Sustainable Development in Public Sector Procurement Guidance on 13 March 2008. The

Guidance was subsequently disseminated to Public Bodies including the Housing Executive under cover of Dear Accounting Officer (DFP 05/08) letter dated 29 May 2008. The objective of the Guidance was to support public bodies integrate equality of opportunity and sustainability including social benefits into the procurement process. As the Dove Gardens scheme was publicly advertised on 23 October 2007 and prior to the issue of the Guidance, the Housing Executive was not in a position to advise Housing Associations on the inclusion of socially beneficial conditions in public contracts.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the advice given by the Central Procurement Directorate about the nature and use of socially beneficial conditions within the contract for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 1693/09)

The Minister for Social Development: No advice was given by Central Procurement Directorate about the nature and use of socially beneficial conditions within the contract for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry.

Dove Gardens Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development, if socially beneficial conditions are not contained in the contract for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry, what expectations her Department has that the contractor will deliver social benefits; and on what these expectations are based. (AQW 1695/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Socially beneficial conditions were not included in the criteria for the Dove Gardens scheme in Derry/Londonderry. In May 2008, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Central Procurement Directorate issued guidance on how equality of opportunity and sustainable development may be integrated into public procurement. However, the Dove Gardens scheme was advertised in October 2007, prior to the issue of the guidance.

Social Benefits

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development what action her Department is taking to ensure that the delivery of social benefits is contained within all future contracts. (AQW 1696/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In May 2008, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Central Procurement Directorate issued guidance on how equality of opportunity and sustainable development may be integrated into public procurement. This provides guidance on how to integrate equality and sustainable development considerations into the procurement process, while meeting the existing statutory duties in relation to equality of opportunity and sustainable development.

The Guidance advocates the New Engineering Contract 3 (NEC3) suite of contracts and that all contracts should be seen to be promoting equality and sustainable development. The Department for Social Development has appointed the Department of Communities & Local Government National Change Agent to advise Housing Associations on future procurement of contracts and on EU Procurement policies.

In October 2008, the Department for Social Development published its Procurement Strategy for the Social Housing Development Programme. Collaborative procurement will provide the conditions for integrating resources, improving consistency and continuity and obtaining better value for money and continuous improvement from clients, contractors and suppliers.

Housing Executive

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the fair employment practices of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and (ii) the number of staff employed in each District office broken down by grade or salary band and by religious background. (AQW 1712/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is committed to the principles of fair employment and as such has had an Equal Opportunities Policy in place since the introduction of equality legislation. Appointments to all vacancies are on the basis of merit and robust equality systems are in place to ensure equality legislation is adhered to. Equality of opportunity is reflected in the day to day management of staff and in the recruitment process.

The Housing Executive developed a comprehensive Affirmative Action Plan in 2003 in consultation with the Northern Ireland Equality Commission. The purpose of the Plan was to ensure equality of opportunity in relation to all equality groupings as outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, with regard to employment opportunities.

The table below details the staff employed in each District Office broken down by grade and religious background:

Area	Grade	Nos.	Protestant	Roman Catholic	NK
Belfast	LV01	20			
	LV02	189			
	LV03	66			
	LV04	111			
	LV05	30			
	LV06	19			
	*LV07>	12			
	TL02	32			
	Total	479	160	311	8
North East	LV01	9			
	LV02	110			
	LV03	55			
	LV04	82			
	LV05	26			
	LV06	16			
	*LV07>	10			
	TL02	31			
	Total	339	216	119	4
South East	LV01	8			
	LV02	96			
	LV03	41			
	LV04	92			
	LV05	30			
	LV06	14			
	*LV07>	10			
	TL02	23			
	Total	314	193	110	11
South	LV01	17			
	LV02	83			
	LV03	37			
	LV04	75			
	LV05	24			
	LV06	13			
	*LV07>	6			
	TL02	20			
	Total	275	99	170	6

Area	Grade	Nos.	Protestant	Roman Catholic	NK
West	LV01	13			
	LV02	88			
	LV03	36			
	LV04	90			
	LV05	23			
	LV06	16			
	*LV07>	11			
	TL02	20			
	Total	297	73	221	3

*Grades Level 7 and above

LV = "Level"

TL02 = "Temporary level"

Pensioners in Poverty

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development what estimate she has made of the number of pensioners who would be taken out of poverty if there was 100 percent take-up of entitlement to (i) winter fuel payments; (ii) pension credit; and (iii) housing benefit. (AQW 1744/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available in the form requested. An assessment of levels of take up for pension credit and housing benefit for tenants is published on the DSD website (http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/statistics_and_research_take_up.htm) and it is hoped to publish the next report in January 2009.

Households are deemed to be in poverty when their equivalised income (before or after housing costs are deducted, according to definition) falls below 60% of UK median equivalised income. Whilst we have accurate data on benefit uptake, we are not as yet able to draw firm conclusions on the impact on the numbers of people in poverty.

I remain concerned at the impact of recent inflation on the ability of poorer households to maintain their expenditure on necessities, and this cannot be assessed from conventional poverty measures. Accordingly, I have commissioned further statistical analysis in this area.

Housing Development Site

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Social Development if she will make a commitment to ensure

that the housing development site at 120/130 Bangor Road, Newtownards, is secured for social housing, as originally intended with the owners of the site.

(AQW 1753/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The proposed scheme at 120-130 Bangor Road, Newtownards has been submitted to the Housing Executive for consideration as part of the annual bidding process for the formulation of the new 5 year Social Housing Development Programme 2009/10-2013/14.

Whilst the proposal for 26 units has been supported in terms of housing need for 2009/10, the Housing Executive will have to prioritise the bids received in accordance with its Strategic Guidelines.

Legahory Emergency Halting Site

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1216/09, to confirm that the Legahory emergency halting site will not be considered as a possible site in the Housing Executive's consideration of 'other necessary sites in Craigavon'. (AQW 1761/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Legahory Emergency Halting Site is intended to be a temporary site pending the development of a permanent transit site in the Craigavon area. Once such a site has been acquired and developed it is planned to close the Legahory temporary site.

The proposed development of facilities on the Emergency Halting Site at Legahory Green is in response to concerns raised by various Traveller representative groups and the Children's Commissioner who have lobbied the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for improved living conditions on the Site and to comply with Craigavon Borough Council licensing stipulations.

Housing Executive

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answers to AQO 2127/08 and AQW 1216/09, to confirm that when the Housing Executive finishes its consideration of 'other necessary sites in Craigavon', the Legahory emergency halting site will close. (AQW 1765/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Legahory Emergency Halting Site is intended to be a temporary site pending the development of a permanent transit site in the Craigavon area. Once such a site has been acquired and developed it is planned to close the Legahory temporary site, as when permanent provision becomes available, the temporary site will no longer be required.

Housing Associations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development when funding will be available for Housing Associations to purchase houses, particularly on the Greyabbey Road, Ballywalter. (AQW 1774/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A proposal to purchase 14 off-the-shelf units at Greyabbey Road, Ballywalter has been submitted to the Housing Executive for consideration as part of the annual bidding process for the formulation of the new 5 year Social Housing Development Programme 2009/10 – 2013/14, which is scheduled to be published in January 2009. Whilst the proposal for 14 units has been supported in terms of housing need for 2009/10, the Housing Executive will have to prioritise the bids received in accordance with its Strategic Guidelines to achieve the maximum number of starts within the available budget.

Sites Owned by Department

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Social Development what sites are owned by her Department in the East Belfast constituency; and to outline the plans and timescale for development of these sites.

(AQW 1792/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department owns sixteen sites in the East Belfast Constituency. These sites are held mainly for regeneration and or social housing purposes. The sites are owned by either the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or the Department. Some are currently being developed as part of the ongoing regeneration programme or being held pending the outcome of the Inner East Masterplanning exercise. A number are also included in a Social Housing Development Programme.

Details are set out in the table below:

Site	Plans	Timescale
Lower Braniel Rd	Connswater Homes Housing Association to provide 23 units of social housing.	2008/09
97-107 Gilnahirk Road	10 units of social housing (currently un-nominated to a Housing Association).	2010/11
Sunderland/Sterling Road	Currently on the Housing Executive's Surplus Land Schedule, but has not yet been allocated to a scheme.	n/a

Site	Plans	Timescale
Queen's Quay (located on the east bank of the River Lagan)	Subject to an appeal against outcome of a recent judicial review. Not possible at this stage to comment on the development of this site.	n/a
Pottinger's Quay (junction of Albertbridge Street and Short Strand)	9 storey building comprising 27 social housing units with the ground floor and mezzanine level being reserved for a community use.	Underway - Due to complete in Autumn 2009
East Bridge Quay (Queen Elizabeth Bridge/ Queens Bridge)	Hard landscaped site. There are currently no plans for development.	n/a
155-157 Newtownards Road & 2 Tower Street. Vacant corner site.	Site acquired by DSD for redevelopment. Being held pending the outcome of the Inner East Masterplan exercise.	n/a
232 Newtownards Road.	This vacant corner property acquired by DSD for redevelopment. Being held pending the outcome of the Inner East Masterplan exercise.	n/a
275 & 277 Albertbridge Road.	Site acquired by DSD for redevelopment. Being held pending the outcome of the Inner East Masterplan exercise.	n/a
2-10 Castlereagh Street / 139-141 Albertbridge Road, 1a Stormount Lane and 16-24 Castlereagh Street	Four sites have been acquired by DSD at the junction of Albertbridge Rd and Castlereagh St to assemble one large development site. This is being held pending the outcome of the Inner East Masterplan exercise.	n/a
98/98a Templemore Ave	Former Templemore Avenue Hospital was acquired by DSD for redevelopment. Being held pending the outcome of the Inner East Masterplan exercise.	n/a
183-191 Beersbridge Road	Acquired by the Department for redevelopment. This site has been agreed for sale to a preferred developer. A planning application for 18 apartments has been submitted.	2009/10
211-217 Beersbridge Road	Acquired by the Department for redevelopment. This site has been agreed for sale to a preferred developer. A planning application for ground floor retail units with 8 apartments above has been submitted.	2009/10

Site	Plans	Timescale
130-138 Castlereagh Street/60-64 Clandeboyne Street	These vacant premises were acquired by the Department for redevelopment. A preferred developer has been selected and it is proposed to construct a mixed use scheme providing retail, office space apartments and 'Live Work' units. The development will take 14-15 months to complete following planning approval.	2009/10
Former Rupert Stanley College, Templemore Avenue	Site including derelict listed building acquired by DSD for redevelopment. Proposals for its redevelopment will be considered in the context of the emerging Inner East Masterplan.	n/a
Ravenhill Reach/Ormeau Embankment	Development proposals agreed. Construction of a business park consisting of 27 small individual office units underway	Underway – Due to complete 2012

Help to Insulate Pensioners' Homes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to increase the money available to help pensioners and old people to fully insulate their homes. (AQW 1827/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have increased my Department's spending on fuel poverty to £35.4 million this year. The Warm Homes Scheme and the Housing Executive's Heating Replacement Scheme offer help to eligible pensioners to insulate their homes. I have bid for additional resources to heat more homes through the in-year monitoring process. However, this bid was not successful. I intend to re-submit this bid in the December monitoring round.

Economy 7 Heating Systems

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 6647/08, for her assessment of the continuing use of Economy 7 heating systems in social housing, given the increases in electricity prices over the last year. (AQW 1848/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The recent rises in fuel costs are impacting on householders across Northern Ireland. There are currently just over 11,000 Housing Executive dwellings with Economy 7 heating. The Housing Executive has been replacing Economy 7 heating where gas or oil is a technically

practical option. I believe that to be the best approach. Economy 7 is not the ideal heating system for most households. To date, the Housing Executive has succeeded in reducing the number of homes heated by Economy 7 from a peak of 26,000 to the current level.

This year, the Housing Executive plans to replace Economy 7 in 458 homes.

Housing Executive

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the rents charged for those who are provided with hostel accommodation whilst awaiting a property from the Housing Executive or Housing Associations. (AQW 1849/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The rents charged for temporary accommodation vary due to size of units, facilities provided and the level of housing management input required. The average rent charged is £60.00 per week.

Temporary accommodation may be provided in Housing Executive hostels, Voluntary Sector hostels or in the private sector.

Housing Executive

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of Housing Executive tenants who are in rent arrears and (ii) the amount of arrears owed to the Housing Executive. (AQW 1850/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive currently has 27,147 tenants in arrears. Of these, 23,129 are current tenants and 4,018 are former tenants. The total amount of arrears owing is £14,131,928.

Economy 7 Heating Systems

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of tenants who have Economy 7 heating systems in (a) Dairyfarm Housing Executive district; and (ii) Lisburn Housing Executive district. (AQW 1853/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are currently 65 Housing Executive properties in Lisburn Dairyfarm and 657 properties in Lisburn Antrim Street District Office Area with Economy 7 heating systems.

Energy Efficiency in Homes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development if she has any plans to provide grants to ensure energy efficiency in homes, outside the Warm Homes Scheme, similar to the Tesco Insulation Project in other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQW 1856/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Tesco insulation project which operates in some parts of the UK is funded through Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT). CERT funding is not available in Northern Ireland and cannot be replicated here. It is my intention to use all available resources to fund the Warm Homes Scheme which will target those people in greatest need with help to insulate and heat their homes.

Tesco Insulation Project

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions her Department has had with Tesco on extending their insulation project to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1857/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has had no discussions with Tesco in relation to extending their insulation project to Northern Ireland. I have been approached by a representative from Enact Energy who, I understand, is acting on Tesco's behalf, seeking a meeting to discuss the possibility of securing Government funding to extend the Scheme to Northern Ireland. It is my intention to use all available resources to fund the Warm Homes Scheme which will target those people in greatest need with help to insulate and heat their homes.

Housing Associations Newbuild Programme

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development (i) the average price paid; and (ii) her assessment of the value for money, of the homes purchased on the open market, through the Housing Association's newbuild programme. (AQW 1939/09)

The Minister for Social Development: During 2007/08, the average price paid to Housing Associations to acquire 'Off the shelf' housing was £173,373. The change in the market has however provided new opportunities to reduce this. For example, the average price paid for 22 units recently acquired in Lurgan was only £150k per home.

I am determined to make the best use of the limited resources available to me and if purchasing more 'Off the shelf' houses will deliver the right homes, in the right location at the right price, then I am prepared to use these homes to complement our newbuild programme that continues to deliver the majority of our target.

Social Housing Programme

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of last year's social housing programme, in which 1500 social housing starts were completed. (AQW 1940/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In 2007/2008 there were a total of 1595 social housing starts. The attached table provides a breakdown of the number and location of each scheme.

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
Ards			
	81 Blenheim Drive, Newtownards	1	
	Upper Crescent, Comber	50	
	16 Lenamore Park, Newtownards	1	
	40 Canberra Gardens, Newtownards	1	
	11 Burnreagh Court, Newtownards	1	
	94 Shackleton Walk, Newtownards	1	
	38 Blenheim Drive, Newtownards	1	
	11 Abbot Gardens, Newtownards	1	
	3 Laburnum Drive, Comber	1	
	Habinteg Acquisitions, Newtownards ESPs Phase 2 (DPF)	3	
	Habinteg Acquisitions, Newtownards ESPs	2	
	Ilex Avenue, Newtownards	6	
	Ards ESPs, Phase 1	3	
	Ards Rural Acquisitions Phase 1A (DPF)	4	
	Ards Acquisitions Phase 1B	3	
	William Street, Newtownards	12	
Total Ards			91
Banbridge			
	Annaclone, Ph2, Banbridge	6	
	Old School Site, Phase 2, Kinallen	10	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	PSNI Site, Moy/ Beechgrove, Dromore/ Hillside Pk, Gilford	2	
Total Banbridge			18
Belfast			
	Acquisitions, Phase 3, West Belfast	6	
	53 Abetta Parade, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	3 Rinnelea Grove, Belfast (West Belfast Acq 3B)	1	
	108 Moyard Parade, Belfast (West Belfast Acq 3A)	1	
	BCHA East Belfast Acquisitions Phase 1	7	
	BCHA East Belfast Acquisitions Phase 1A	7	
	BCHA East Belfast Acquisitions Phase 1B	3	
	135 Horn Drive (West Belfast Acq 3C)	1	
	221 Holywood Road, Belfast	32	
	14-20 University Street, Belfast	20	
	Glenside, Ligoniel	32	
	2A Brookhill Avenue, Belfast	11	
	339 - 343 Donegall Road, Belfast	10	
	McAuley Street, Phase 3, Belfast	14	
	99 Manor Street, Belfast	1	
	North Howard Street, Belfast	46	
	145 Cavehill Road, Belfast (DPF)	6	
	1-3 Thorndale Avenue, Belfast (OS) (DPF)	6	
	8 McDonnell Street, Belfast	1	
	20 Ballymurphy Parade, Belfast	1	
	North Belfast Acquisitions (DPF)	17	
	Lower Antrim Road, Infill, Belfast	16	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	North Phase 2B, Balfour Avenue, Belfast (ALP)	9	
	Norfolk Road, Belfast	18	
	10 Clifton Crescent, Belfast	1	
	18 Bloomfield Drive, Belfast	1	
	Maple Villas, Springfield Road, Belfast	16	
	Springfield Mill, Springfield Road, Belfast	9	
	Connswater, Phase 3, Belfast (T)	88	
	Harland Walk, Belfast	18	
	6-10 Severn Street, Belfast	6	
	15 Bryson Court, Belfast	1	
	Acquisitions, Ph2A, Connswater	2	
	Connswater Acquisitions West Belfast (DPF)	1	
	Connswater Acquisitions West Belfast Phase 1A	2	
	27 Newcastle Street, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	179 York Park, Belfast	1	
	Gate Lodge, Flax Street, Belfast	9	
	Ardoyne Acquisitions, Ph6B, Belfast	3	
	Ardoyne Acquisitions Phase 7A, Belfast	6	
	Ardoyne Acquisitions Phase 7B, Belfast	1	
	107 Duneden Park & 24 Stratford Gardens, Belfast (DPF)	2	
	13 Kingston Court, Belfast	1	
	Ardoyne Acquisitions, Phase 7C, Belfast	1	
	Ardoyne Acquisitions, Phase 7D, Belfast	1	
	162-172 Antrim Road, Belfast	16	
	293 Antrim Road, Belfast	8	
	34 Cliftonville Road, Belfast	9	
	45 Cliftonville Road, Belfast	15	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	Carvill Site, Annadale, Belfast	50	
	Grove North Belfast Acquisitions Phase 1A	2	
	Grove North Belfast Acquisitions Phase 1B	1	
	Lawnbrook Avenue, Shankill Road, Belfast	6	
	23 Thorndale Avenue, Belfast (OTS)	3	
	3 Rigby Close, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	12 Rosemount Gardens, Belfast	3	
	8 Glandore Avenue, Belfast (OS)	5	
	Newington Acquisitions, Ph6B, Belfast	2	
	Newington Acquisitions, Ph7, Belfast	7	
	Hillview Rd/Crumlin Rd, Belfast	75	
	Travellers Sites, Monagh Road, Phases 1&2, Belfast	16	
	233 Whitewell Road, Belfast	12	
	Glendhu Belfast	14	
	Derryveagh Drive, Suffolk Road, Belfast	2	
	Jamaica Street, Phase 1A, Belfast	6	
	Colinpark Street, Belfast	3	
	Stanhope Site, Phase 1, Belfast	10	
	1 Creeslough Court, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	143d Glen Road, Belfast	2	
	33 Danube Street, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	30 Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	83 Beechmount Grove, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	90 Creeslough Park, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	50 Beechfield Street, Belfast (DPF)	1	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	3 Mountförde Gardens, Belfast	1	
	Dunmisk Park, Phase 3, Belfast	21	
	Devonshire Tradas, Phase 2, Belfast	23	
	42 Glenalina Park, Whiterock Rd, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	83 Connsbrook Avenue, Belfast (DPF)	1	
	42 Ballymurphy Road, Belfast	1	
	Westbank Home, Palmerston Road, Belfast	40	
Total Belfast			800
Castlereagh			
	Gleneagles Gardens, Ballybeen	12	
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	20	
Total Castlereagh			32
Cookstown			
	Old Rectory Park, Cookstown	3	
Total Cookstown			3
Craigavon			
	Gilpin Mews, Old Portadown Road, Lurgan	20	
	Lilburn Hall & Bowen's Close, Lurgan	6	
Total Craigavon			26
Derry			
	Springtown Road Ph4/ Hawthorn Phase 3, Derry	14	
	Acquisitions Derry Phase 10 (DPF)	10	
	Derry Acquisitions Phase 11	6	
	Habinteg Acquisitions Derry Phase 9	6	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	Westbank DPF, Derry	3	
	Derry Acquisitions (DPF)	4	
	West Bank, Ph15A, Derry	5	
	West Bank, Ph15B, Derry	4	
	West Bank, Ph15C, Derry	5	
	West Bank, Ph15D, Derry	4	
	West Bank, Ph15E, Derry	7	
	West Bank, Ph15F, Derry	3	
	West Bank, Ph15G, Derry	6	
	West Bank, Ph15H, Derry	6	
	West Bank Phase 15I, Derry	7	
	West Bank Phase 15J, Derry	5	
	West Bank Phase 15K, Derry	5	
	West Bank Phase 15L, Derry	4	
	West Bank Phase 15M, Derry	8	
	West Bank Phase 15N, Derry	1	
	28 Bracken Park, Derry	1	
	14 Knockalla Park, Derry	1	
	10 Elaghmore Park, Derry	1	
	149 Gallaigh Park, Derry	1	
	Rural Acquisitions, Ballycanice Close, Eglinton	3	
	Rural Acquisitions, Eglinton Phase 2	3	
	Bonds Hill, Derry	17	
	15 Curragh Walk, Derry	1	
Total Derry			141
Down			
	Acquisitions, Phase 1, Downpatrick	7	
	45A Bracken Avenue, Newcastle	1	
	Down ESPs Phase 1	2	
	Down ESPs Phase 2	2	
Total Down			12
Dungannon			
	Thomas Street, Dungannon	10	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	Millview, Manor, Dungannon	29	
	Dunlea Vale, Dungannon	1	
	Acquisitions, Dungannon	9	
	West Bank Phase 15L, Derry	1	
	PSNI Site, Moy/Beechgrove, Dromore/Hillside Pk, Gilford	5	
Total Dungannon			55
Fermanagh			
	2 & 8 Mill Line, Derrygonnelly	2	
	25 Crevenish Park, Kesh (DPF)	1	
	36 Loughview Drive, Enniskillen (DPF)	1	
	Sycamore Drive, Enniskillen	7	
Total Fermanagh			11
Larne			
	Beechlands, Carnlough	6	
Total Larne			6
Limavady			
	Greysteel Phase 2, Limavady	11	
	17A Roemill Gardens, Limavady	1	
	West Bank Ph15H, Derry	1	
	West Bank Phase 15J, Derry	2	
	West Bank Phase 15M, Derry	1	
Total Limavady			16
Lisburn			
	BCHA Acquisitions Poleglass Phase 3A (24 Glenbawn Square)	1	
	BCHA Acquisitions, Poleglass Phase 3B	3	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	Cromwell's Close, Lisburn	10	
	Bellevue Manor, Lisburn	19	
	49 Ivan Street, Lisburn	1	
	Causeway Meadows, Lisburn	22	
	Connswater Acquisitions Poleglass (DPF)	1	
	Connswater Acquisitions, Poleglass Ph 1B	5	
	Flax Acquisitions, Phase 7F, Lisburn	1	
	Habinteg Greater West Belfast ESPs Phase 1	5	
	Habinteg Greater West Belfast ESPs Phase 1A	5	
	West Bank, Ph15D, Derry	1	
	9 Ardcaoin Drive, Poleglass (DPF)	1	
	3 Glenwood Walk, Poleglass (DPF)	1	
	9 Glenwood Court, Poleglass (DPF)	1	
	120 Glenkeen, Poleglass (DPF)	1	
	7 Glenwood View, Poleglass (DPF)	1	
	Ballymacoss Central, Phase 5, Lisburn	75	
Total Lisburn			154
Magherafelt			
	West Bank Phase 15K, Derry	1	
	West Bank Phase 15L, Derry	1	
Total Magherafelt			2
Moyle			
	2 Marconi Park, Ballycastle	1	
	33 Stroanshesk Park, Ballycastle	1	
	40 Altananam Park, Ballycastle	1	
Total Moyle			3

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
Newry & Mourne			
	70 Mourneview Park, Newry	1	
	Lisbane Park, Mayobridge	8	
	Newry & Mourne ESPs Phase 2	2	
	Newry & Mourne ESPs	8	
	Canal Street, Phase 3, Newry	29	
	Springmartin, Martins Lane, Newry	23	
	5 Ganna Way, Warrenpoint (DPF)	1	
Total Newry & Mourne			72
Newtownabbey			
	6 Bryson Square, Newtownabbey	1	
	Mill Road, Bawnmore (OTS)	8	
	Green Walk, Newtownabbey	22	
	Derry Acquisitions (DPF)	1	
Total Newtownabbey			32
North Down			
	3 South Avenue, Bangor	1	
	28-32 Belfast Road, Bangor & 18 Inglewood Park, Bangor	37	
	2A Springwell Drive (1 Donaghadee Road), Groomsport	24	
	32 Jackson Road, Hollywood	1	
	Mayne House, Bloomfield Road, Bangor (Croft)	9	
	14 Bloomfield Court, Bangor	1	
	15 Ballyminetrigh Gardens, Bangor	1	
	33 Ballyminetrigh Gardens, Bangor	1	
	Ards Rural Acquisitions Phase 1A (DPF)	1	

District Council	Scheme Name	Units	Total
	Ards Acquisitions Phase 1B	1	
	5 Dufferin Avenue, Bangor	2	
Total North Down			79
Strabane			
	Lismore Park, Sion Mills, Strabane	20	
	West Bank, Ph15B, Derry	1	
	West Bank, Ph15D, Derry	1	
	West Bank Ph15F, Derry	4	
	West Bank Ph15G, Derry	1	
	West Bank Ph15H, Derry	1	
	West Bank Ph15J, Derry	2	
	West Bank Ph15K, Derry	3	
	West Bank Ph15L, Derry	2	
	West Bank Phase 15N, Derry	6	
	26 Mourne Park, Newtownstewart	1	
Total Strabane			42
			1595

Housing Executive

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost to the Housing Executive to bring off the shelf houses up to Housing Association standard, per unit of housing.
(AQW 1941/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not held in the manner requested. The acquisition cost to the NIHE will include any additional work necessary to bring an off-the-shelf house up to the appropriate standard for Housing Associations.

Housing Executive

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the rent charged by (i) the Housing Executive; and (ii) Housing Associations.
(AQW 1942/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The rents charged by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive

and individual Housing Associations vary depending on a range of factors including the age of the property, number and size of rooms and household amenities, such as whole house or partial heating.

It is therefore not possible to provide the information in the format the member requested.

Assistance for Tenants

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development what measures her Department has in place to assist tenants who are in rent arrears.
(AQW 1943/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a range of measures in place to assist tenants who are in rent arrears. These include:

- Early identification and contact with the tenant regarding their rent arrears problems.
- Assessing the tenant for eligibility to Housing Benefit.
- Confidential home visits to the tenant to discuss their rent arrears problem.
- Accepting payments by instalments, if this is of help to the tenant.
- Arranging for rent arrears to be deducted from Benefits at a rate of £3.05 per week.
- With the tenant's permission, arrangements can be made for deductions to be made from Employers.
- Deductions can also be made from grants due, for example a redecoration grant.
- The Housing Executive provide basic money and budgeting advice to tenants.
- Referral to Citizen Advice Bureau can also be made for difficult or specialist cases.

Social Housing Starts

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many; and (ii) the geographical location, of the 1500 social housing starts that are (a) newbuild; (b) open market; or (c) off the shelf.
(AQW 1945/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive achieved 1595 starts during the 2007/2008 Programme year. Of these 982 were newbuild, 343 were purchased on the open market and 270 were purchased directly from the developer off the shelf.

The attached table shows the geographical location of the 1595 starts;

District Council	Newbuild	Open Market	Off the shelf
Ards	68	23	0
Banbridge	18	0	0
Belfast	554	103	143
Castlereagh	32	0	0
Cookstown	3	0	0
Craigavon	6	0	20
Derry	31	110	0
Down	0	12	0
Dungannon	16	10	29
Fermanagh	7	4	0
Larne	0	0	6
Limavady	11	5	0
Lisburn	85	28	41
Magherafelt	0	2	0
Moyle	0	3	0
Newry & Mourne	37	12	23
Newtownabbey	22	2	8
North Down	72	7	0
Strabane	20	22	0

Land at Andersonstown Barracks

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current value of the land at Andersonstown Barracks; and what consideration she has given to having the land re-valued. (AQW 1950/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The current value of the land has not been assessed. I will consider having the site revalued.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) her Department's responsibilities in relation to fuel poverty; and (ii) what measures her Department has taken to alleviate fuel poverty. (AQW 1952/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department is committed to alleviating fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. My Department's primary tool in tackling fuel poverty is the Warm Homes Scheme which provides a range of heating and insulation measures to eligible owner occupiers or those in the private rented sector. In addition the Housing Executive administers the Heating Replacement

Scheme for those people in social housing. I have increased my Department's spending on tackling fuel poverty to £35.4 million this year.

In response to rising fuel prices I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force in May 2008. I developed a set of practical proposals from the task force report to help those people most affected by the rise in fuel prices this winter. These proposals were circulated to Ministers as a draft Executive paper. Unfortunately, the Executive did not meet so I revised the paper taking account of Ministers' views and as the Executive have still not met, I have sought clearance to bring forward my proposals under Urgent Procedure.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development if she has approached any utility companies about setting up a utility fund to alleviate fuel poverty, as suggested by Help the Aged. (AQW 1953/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When establishing the Fuel Poverty Task Force I invited all energy companies to actively participate. Representatives from NIE Energy, Phoenix Natural Gas and Firmus all engaged fully. During discussions the issue of setting up a utility fund was raised and will be explored further as part of the recommendations of the Task Force.

A package of proposals, including consideration of how the utilities could help contribute to the alleviation of Fuel poverty, is currently with the Executive.

Unfortunately the Executive has not met for several months and has not therefore considered my proposals.

Fuel Advisory Group

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development, as part of her role in the Fuel Advisory Group, what discussions she has had with the gas and electricity utility companies to reduce their charges, given the decrease in fuel prices. (AQW 1954/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Although my officials and I have engaged with the energy utilities in relation to fuel poverty, responsibility for energy prices rests with the industry regulator and with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

My fuel poverty proposals currently held up by the lack of Executive meetings include an initiative relating to the energy utilities.

People Over 60 Purchasing Homes

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development what measures she is taking to ensure that (i) people over 60 will be allowed to purchase their homes; and (ii) that Section 75 obligations will be met in relation to age. (AQW 1955/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Under the House Sales Schemes all social Housing Tenants, irrespective of age, who satisfy the eligibility criteria, may apply to buy their homes.

When the House Sales Scheme was reviewed in 2004 equality screening concluded that the proposals would not unfairly disadvantage any of the Section 75 groups.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with energy companies about their contribution towards tackling fuel poverty. (AQW 1956/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force in May 2008 I invited all energy companies to actively participate. Representatives from NIE Energy, Phoenix Natural Gas and Firmus all engaged fully with the Task Force. The Task Force addressed the issue of contributions from energy companies towards tackling fuel poverty and this will be pursued as part of the recommendations from the Task force.

Land Gift Aided or Transferred by Department

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development what land, in the last five years, has her Department gift aided or transferred at a nominal or nil value to (a) organisations; (b) individuals; or (c) businesses; and to detail the (i) value; (ii) previous use; and (iii) current use, of this land. (AQW 1957/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department has disposed of 40 sites at nominal or nil value. Details are set out in the table below:

	Date	Description	Value	Organisation / Individuals	Previous Use	Current Use
1	Jan 04	Land at Oxford Street, Belfast	£10	Laganside	Footway / Unused Subway	Restaurants / Bars
2	Nov 04	Land at Donegall Quay / Queen's Square	£100	Laganside	Footway / Roadway	New Road Layout
3	Apr 05	146-154 North Queen Street, Belfast	£58,999	Belfast City Council	Vacant Land	Multi-Sports Facility
4	Dec 06	Land at Cooke Street, Belfast	£10	An Droichead (Irish Language School)	Vacant Land (Land-Locked)	Community Garden
5	Various Over Last 5 Years	Clowney Gardens Scheme, Belfast	Nil	52 Residents	Waste Ground	Garden Extensions & Allotments
6	Various Over Last 5 Years	Springfield Drive Gardens Scheme, Belfast	Nil	17 Residents	Waste Ground	Garden Extensions & Allotments
7	April 05	Land at Spencer Road, Derry	£1	Braehead Developments	Derelict	Primary Care Medical Practice
8	June 08	Portion of Carlisle PassSteps, Derry	£1	Patrick and Kathleen Doherty	Disused Passageway	No change as yet
9	October 07	Portion of Carlisle Pass Steps, Derry	£1	Glenmore Developments	Disused Passageway	No change as yet
10	October 2004	Larne Road site, Ballymena	£1	DRD Roads	Agriculture	Road
11	June 2002	Adj to Pinebank Community Centre, Craigavon	£1	DRD	2metre Road Verge	Now part of the adopted Roadway
12	Nov 2002	Land at rear of Church, Steeple Rd, Antrim	£1	Antrim Borough Council	Vacant land	Amenity Use

	Date	Description	Value	Organisation / Individuals	Previous Use	Current Use
13	Dec 2002	Ecos Centre Ballymena	£1	Mr McDonnell	Garden	Garden
14	Dec 2002	Ecos Centre Ballymena	£1	Ballymena Borough Council	Roadway	Roadway
15	March 2003	Kiln Lane Lurgan	£1	N Gordon	Encroachment	Garden
16	March 2003	Larne Rd Ballymena	£1	DRD	Road verge	Adopted Road
17	June 2003	2 Lisoom Rd Ballymena	£1	DRD	Road verge	Perfection of title
18	February 2004	Belmont Rd Antrim	£1	Water Service	Vacant land	Pumping Station
19	September 2004	Monbrief Rd Craigavon	£1	NIHE	Vacant land	Traveller's Site
20	September 2004	Moylena Rd Antrim	NIL	DRD	Footway	Footway
21	March 2005	Land adj to 5 Franklyn Pk, Lurgan	£1	Funston & Spence	Area of Encroachment	Garden
22	April 2005	Lands adj to 7 Franklyn Pk Lurgan	£1	Mr Bibb	Area of Encroachment	Garden
23	April 2005	Land adj to 4 Franklyn Pk Lurgan	£1	D Johnston	Area of Encroachment	Garden
24.	January 2008	Lower English Street, Armagh	£1	Mr & Mrs McVeigh	Store	Store
25	June 2005	Church Road Kells	£1	DRD	Road Verge	Adopted Road
26	November 2005	Ballynamoney Lane Lurgan	£1	DRD	Vacant Land	Future Road Scheme
27	February 2006	Clanrolla Rd Portadown	£1	W Holmes	Area of Encroachment	Garden Area
28	February 2006	Derryvore Portadown	£1	Water Service	Vacant Land	Pumping Station
29	April 2006	Lakeview Rd Craigavon	£1	Craigavon Borough Council	Balancing Lakes	Balancing Lakes
30	May 2006	Rathenraw Ind Es Antrim	£1	S & E Supplies	Area of Encroachment	Industrial Unit
31	October 2006	Derrydry Lane, Armagh	NIL	DRD	Road Verge	Adopted Road
32	November 2006	Moyraverty Craigavon	£1	Express Parcels	Area of Encroachment	Industrial area
33	January 2007	Seagoe Portadown	£1	DRD	Road Embankment	Adopted Road
34	March 2007	28 29 32 & 33 Upper Ramone Pk, Portadown	£1 each	McKibben, McFadden, Thornbury & Reid	Areas of Encroachment	Gardens
35	April 2007	31 Upper Ramone Pk Portadown	£1	Mr Coalter	Area of Encroachment	Garden
36	April 2007	Belfast Rd/Fountain Hill Antrim	£1	DRD	Vacant land	Part of Road Junction

	Date	Description	Value	Organisation / Individuals	Previous Use	Current Use
37	April 2007	Larne Rd Ballymena	£1	DRD	Vacant land	Road Verge
38	May 2007	Tullygally Rd Craigavon	£1	DRD	Road Verge	Adopted Road
39	May 2007	35 Upper Ramone Pk Portadown	£1	Mr Knox	Area of encroachment	Garden
40	July 2007	30 & 34 Upper Ramone Pk Portadown	£1	Millar & McCreery	Areas of encroachment	Gardens

Social Housing Development Programme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how much was paid for the 22 homes in Lurgan purchased directly from the builder.
(AQW 1958/09)

The Minister for Social Development: South Ulster Housing Association recently acquired 22 new homes for the Social Housing Development Programme in Main Street, Lurgan at a total cost of approximately £3.3m. The Department contributed £2.51m in grant-aid towards these homes.

Improvement Schemes

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what improvement schemes are planned for the Hannaglen Heights area of West Belfast.
(AQW 1959/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive own 30 properties in the Hannaglen Heights area of West Belfast. These properties were built in 1995. As they were recently built, there are no capital improvement schemes planned.

Multi-Element Improvement Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Multi-Element Improvement Scheme planned for the Hospital Lane area of Limivady.
(AQW 1964/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development approved the overall strategy for Hospital Lane on Monday 21 July 2008. The strategy will be implemented in three Phases. The Northern Housing Executive approved the detailed scheme design for Phase 1 of 50 dwellings on Wednesday 24 September 2008. The current programmed start date for Phase 1 is August 2009.

Housing Executive

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive schemes were undertaken in the North Down Borough for the year 2008-9.
(AQW 1969/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has seven planned maintenance and improvement schemes for North Down for the year 2008/2009.

Housing Executive

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive schemes in the North Down Borough have been deferred in 2008-9; and how many of these were deferred from previous years.
(AQW 1970/09)

The Minister for Social Development: None of the seven scheduled maintenance and improvement schemes for North Down have been deferred in 2008/2009. However an environmental improvement scheme at Rathhgill 4 & 5 was deferred from 2007/2008 as planning permission was outstanding. This scheme is included in the 2008/2009 schedule.

Jobs and Benefits Offices

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the locations of all Jobs and Benefits Offices.
(AQW 1983/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency currently has 25 Jobs & Benefits offices in the following locations:

Antrim Jobs & Benefits Office	Armagh Jobs & Benefits Office
Castle Street Antrim Co Antrim BT41 4JE	Alexander Road Armagh BT61 7JL

Ballymoney Jobs & Benefits Office 37-45 John Street Ballymoney Co Antrim BT53 6DT	Banbridge Jobs & Benefits Office 18 Castlewellan Road Banbridge Co Down BT32 4AZ
Carrickfergus Jobs & Benefits Office Davy's Street Carrickfergus Co Antrim BT38 8DJ	Coleraine Jobs & Benefits Office Crown Buildings Artillery Road Coleraine BT52 2AA
Dungannon Jobs & Benefits Office Crown Buildings 36 Thomas Street Dungannon Co Tyrone BT70 1EN	Enniskillen Jobs & Benefits Office Queen Elizabeth Road Enniskillen Co Fermanagh BT 74 7JD
Falls Jobs & Benefits Office 19 Falls Road Belfast BT12 4PH	Foyle Jobs & Benefits Office Asylum Road Londonderry BT48 7EA
Hollywood Road Jobs & Benefits Office 106-108 Hollywood Road Belfast BT4 1JU	Kilkeel Jobs & Benefits Office Newry Street Kilkeel Co Down BT34 4DR
Knockbreda Jobs & Benefits Office Upper Knockbreda Road Belfast BT8 6SX	Larne Jobs & Benefits Office 59 Pound Street Larne BT40 1SB
Limavady Jobs & Benefits Office 9 Connell Street Limavady Co Londonderry BT49 0DU	Lisburn Jobs & Benefits Office Bow House 71 Bow Street Lisburn Co Antrim BT28 1BB
Lisnagelvin Jobs & Benefits Office 2 Crescent Road Londonderry BT47 2NJ	Lurgan Jobs & Benefits Office Alexandra Crescent Lurgan Co Armagh BT66 6BB
Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits Office 31 Station Road Magherafelt Co Londonderry BT45 5DJ	Newry Jobs & Benefits Office 40 Bridge Street Newry Co Down BT35 8AJ
Newtownabbey Jobs & Benefits Office 39 Church Road Newtownabbey Co Antrim BT36 7LB	Omagh Jobs & Benefits Office 7 Mountjoy Road Omagh Co Tyrone BT79 7BB

Portadown Jobs & Benefits Office 140 Jervis Street Portadown Co Armagh BT62 1HA	Shaftesbury Square Jobs & Benefits Office Conor Building 107 Great Victoria Street Belfast BT2 7AG
Shankill Jobs & Benefits Office 15-25 Snugville Street Belfast BT13 1PP	

Compensation Recovery Scheme

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development to provide the total figure for the recovery of social security benefits under the Compensation Recovery Scheme, since 2000.

(AQW 2008/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below.

COMPENSATION RECOVERY FROM 2000 - 2008

Year	Benefit Amount Recovered
2000/01	No longer available
2001/02	£5,833,899
2002/03	£7,718,419
2003/04	£7,219,554
2004/05	£6,890,103
2005/06	£7,214,218
2006/07	£7,727,263
2007/08	£7,944,406
2008 to 31/10/08	£3,432,455

Phoenix Gas

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development why residents of Pinetree Manor Fold in West Belfast, who do not use gas in their homes, are paying for meters installed in the property by Phoenix Gas.

(AQW 2011/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Tenants at Pinetree Manor live in self contained flats. Each flat is heated by Phoenix Gas and is individually metered. There is a requirement by Phoenix Gas for all customers to pay for a minimum of 2000 kilowatt/ hours per year, which equates to £133.71 per annum. However, for tenants who have Pay As You Go meters installed, which is common in social housing schemes, there is no charge if there is no consumption of gas.

Phoenix Gas

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions her Department is having with Phoenix Gas to ensure that people living in Folds in West Belfast, who do not use gas in their homes, are not charged for meters installed in their properties. (AQW 2012/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department is not currently engaged in discussions with Phoenix Gas on this issue. If FOLD tenants do not have gas heating then gas meters are not installed in their property.

Strabane Regeneration

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development if she will (i) acknowledge the work carried out by Strabane 2000 in delivering substantial social and physical regeneration initiatives in the town centre and its environs; and (ii) commit to supporting the continued work of the town centre regeneration body. (AQW 2025/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I visited Strabane District Council offices on Wednesday 23 January 2008. As part of that day's events I met with Strabane 2000 to mark its achievements over its initial ten year lifespan. I commend Strabane 2000 as a partnership organisation committed to its founding principles of encouraging the redevelopment of Strabane Town Centre by promoting its social and physical regeneration.

I am happy to commit to supporting the continuing good work of Strabane 2000 through my North West Development Office. I wish to highlight the joint DSD/Strabane District Council sponsorship of the Strabane Town Centre Master Plan in consultation with Strabane 2000, Planning and Roads Services. Work to secure consultancy support to deliver this Master Plan is at an advanced procurement stage and will provide a comprehensive action plan to inform future developments.

Strabane Community Bridge Project

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department's North West Development Office will provide funding towards the Strabane Community Bridge Project. (AQW 2026/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department has received a written request for funding of the Melvin Bridge element of this project. My officials have sought further information from Strabane District Council. On receipt of this

information, detailed consideration will be given to the question of a contribution from DSD, in line with my commitment to support regeneration efforts in Strabane and subject to normal Departmental priorities and budgetary constraints.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development how many applicants, aged 70 and over and accepted for the Warm Homes Scheme, are currently on the waiting list. (AQW 2027/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In April 2008 I amended the eligibility criteria for the heating element of the Warm Homes Scheme to ensure that householders in greatest need got help first. Since then householders with no central heating, solid fuel, Economy 7 or bottled gas central heating have been treated as priority. 70 such householders have been surveyed and are being allocated to contractors to carry out the heating installations. For these priority cases there is no waiting list.

There are 339 outstanding applications from householders aged over 70 who applied to the scheme prior to April 2008. These householders all have operational oil heating systems which require upgrading to improve their energy efficiency.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development what the average waiting time is for people accepted onto the Warm Homes Scheme who are over the age of 70, and are currently on the waiting list. (AQW 2028/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since 25 April 2008 when I instructed Eaga to introduce prioritisation measures, all applicants over the age of 70 with no central heating, solid fuel, Economy 7 or bottled gas central heating have had their properties surveyed and are in the process of being allocated to contractors. Once the work has been allocated to a contractor, the waiting time for commencement of work is 6 weeks.

All applicants aged 70 years and over have had their property surveyed. However, these householders have operational oil heating systems which require upgrading to improve their energy efficiency. I will be bidding in December monitoring for extra resources to assist these householders.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale involved in bringing forward urgent procedures for her proposals to tackle fuel poverty. (AQW 2108/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In response to rising fuel prices I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force in May 2008. I developed a set of practical proposals from the task force report to help those people most affected by the rise in fuel prices this winter. These proposals were circulated to Ministers as a draft Executive paper. Unfortunately, the Executive has not met so I submitted the Executive paper on fuel poverty to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdfM) on 2 October for clearance to bring forward my proposals under Urgent Procedure. I am not in a position to detail timescales involved as OFMdfM have not yet responded on the matter.

Approval by the Executive is still urgently required if some of the proposals are to be implemented in time for this Winter.

With regard to internet connection speed within Parliament Buildings, the IS Office intends to undertake planned reviews for a range of IT issues. 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.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Broadband Service for Members

Ms J McCann asked the Assembly Commission what steps it is taking to improve broadband service for Members, particularly during lunchtime. (AQW 1924/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): In May 2007 as part of the project to replace the obsolete IT Equipment in use by Members and Secretariat staff a contract was awarded to BT for the provision for a centrally funded Broadband service for Members. The contract provided for a BT "Broadband Business Option 3" Internet connection providing up to 6Mbps to be supplied to each Member's office. To date 60 Members have availed of the service whilst others have an alternative business arrangement in place.

To date any complaints lodged with the Information Systems Office, who manage the contact on behalf of the NI Assembly Commission, have been limited to difficulties in getting the service installed or with co-ordinating a move to another location. The contract is reviewed on a regular basis and at the last contract review meeting, held on Thursday 30th October; BT announced a price reduction for the current service.

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