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Assembly

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(Hansard)

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

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 16 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I would be grateful for Members' attention before we move to the second item on the Order Paper. At the start of last Monday's sitting, numerous points of order were raised by various Members. Some of those were dealt with at the time, and I will deal with others that were legitimate in due course.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Authorities (Reform) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Public Authorities (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law today, Monday 16 February 2009.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

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

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 February 2009.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 26 January 2009.

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

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Supply Resolution for the 2008-2009 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Vote on Account

Mr Speaker: As the next two motions relate to Supply resolutions, I propose to conduct only one debate. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. I will then call the Minister to move the second motion, before putting the Question without further debate.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for this debate. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will have up to one hour in which to propose the motions and up to one hour in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

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

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £12,485,717,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,730,008,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,618,965,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £7,078,596,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in

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Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2009-10 document that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.
— [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).*]

Mr Speaker: I wish to make it clear to the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he has one hour in which to speak to the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Assembly's main focus today is on the final spending proposals for the current financial year, and on providing Departments and other public bodies with the legislative authority to finalise expenditure in 2008-09. Therefore, I propose to address two important Supply resolutions, in order to seek the Assembly's approval of the Executive's final spending plans for 2008-09 and to provide interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2009-2010, in the form of a Vote on Account.

The levels of Supply set out in the resolutions are requested under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make recommendations to the Assembly leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

The first resolution seeks the Assembly's approval for the issue of a total cash sum not exceeding £12,485,717,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund, and for the use of total resources not exceeding £15,730,008,000, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09, which were laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.

The reconciliation from the total resources to the cash sum required excludes non-cash items, such as depreciation and the cost of capital, and it includes provision for capital expenditure and adjustments for debtors and creditors and the use of provisions.

The amount of cash and resources for 2008-09, covered by the first resolution, supersedes the Vote on Account provision in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which was passed in the Assembly this time last year, and the additional provision for 2008-09 in the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which was passed in June 2008.

The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval on the issue of a cash sum of £5,618,965,000 and resources of £7,078,596,000 on account for the 2009-2010 financial year, in advance of the consideration and approval of the 2009-2010 Main Estimates and the Budget Bill by the Assembly in June 2009.

Once approved by the Assembly, the resolutions are the precursor to the Budget Bill, which I plan to introduce to the Assembly later today. Subject to Assembly approval and Royal Assent, it will provide the formal legal authority for Departments to incur expenditure for this financial year and for the first three to four months of the 2009-2010 financial year.

I, therefore, remind Members of the importance of the Supply resolutions for which approval is being sought today. As Members are well aware, Budgets, which set spending plans for future years and on which we rightly spend many hours debating, and the in-year monitoring rounds, which amend those plans, do not, in themselves, convey cash or resources to Departments. Nor do they provide Departments with the legal authority to spend that cash or to use those resources. That will be done today through this legislature's approval of the Supply resolutions and the Estimates, followed by the associated Budget Bill. That means, of course, that after the close of the financial year the Assembly will hold Departments accountable for managing and controlling that spending and use of resources within the limits authorised today.

Members will be aware of the important role that has been played by the Public Accounts Committee in ensuring accountability to the House.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that you will be gratified to hear that I do not propose to try the patience of the Chamber with the detail of every Department's spending plans, as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates volume that is before the House. Rather, I will leave Members to study the detail — as, I am sure, they have — and at the end of today's debate, I will endeavour to deal with any issues raised. However, Members will appreciate that I will not be able to respond to specific departmental queries, and in such cases, where appropriate, I will ask the relevant Minister to issue a written response.

As this is only the second time that the House has considered spring Supplementary Estimates, I will remind Members of two things. First, the final Estimates reflect the spending plans of Departments — not the total spending plans of the wider public sector, including arm's-length bodies. Secondly, they reflect the annually managed expenditure as well as the departmental expenditure limits. I appreciate that during Budget debates and monitoring rounds, the focus is on the assigned departmental expenditure limit, over which the House has full discretion regarding allocation of spend, but we must remember that the Northern Ireland Budget also includes approximately £8 billion of annually managed expenditure for demand-led services, such as social security benefits and public-sector pension schemes.

In that context, the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect both the departmental expenditure limit changes that were agreed at the June, September and December monitoring rounds, and the annually managed expenditure changes that have been agreed since the presentation, in June 2008, of the Main Estimates.

Following the decisions that have been taken by the Executive since the December monitoring round,

additional headroom has been built into the spring Supplementary Estimates in order to facilitate final decisions in the February monitoring round.

I will provide the House with details of the headroom in order to pre-empt any misunderstanding by Members or any confusion that might arise during the debate. Two items of provision have been included that relate to decisions that have been taken since the December monitoring round and which, therefore, are required to be included in the Estimates and the Budget Bill. Those provisions are the £15 million in the Department for Social Development (DSD) Estimate for the fuel poverty package, and the £3.9 million in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) Estimate along with £2.9 million in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) Estimate for the voluntary cull and disposal scheme and hardship payments in relation to the contaminated feed incident.

The Estimates have also been adjusted to reflect the changes that resulted from the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water (NIW). Members will recall that I negotiated the cover for that with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Prime Minister in respect of the additional non-cash costs associated with a deferral on the introduction of water charges.

At the preparation of the spring Supplementary Estimates in early January, it was thought prudent — since the Estimates and the Budget Bill are the final statutory ceiling on spending plans — to include some headroom amounting to £60 million in order to provide the Executive, in the current economic downturn, with the flexibility in February monitoring to make allocations if resources become available. Such headroom has been included with strict conditions. For instance, resources that have been allocated in February monitoring must be used only for the agreed purpose, and virement approval will not be given later to cover excess spending in any other areas.

Departments have also been advised that inclusion of headroom is not an indication that additional resources will be allocated by the Executive where the latest position is clear that resource constraints are as tight as anticipated by the Executive in December. I am sure that Members will appreciate the wisdom of that course, and if it had not been followed, Members would, rightly, be levelling criticism for short-sightedness and lack of flexibility.

I want to indulge in a backward look at the financial year that is fast drawing to a close and which has resulted in the Estimates that are before the House today. In the three monitoring rounds that have passed so far this year, a total of £134.6 million of reduced requirements were surrendered by Departments. As well as reducing the

opening overcommitment, we were able to meet £84.9 million of bids from Departments for emerging pressures.

The Estimates include an increase of more than £25 million in various demand-led social-security benefits that the Department for Social Development administers.

12.15 pm

In addition to the £134.6 million resource reduced requirements, Departments declared reduced requirements of £135.2 million on the capital side, and bids to the value of £54.6 million were met. In order to boost capital spend in the current economic climate, £9.4 million was brought forward from 2009-2010 into this financial year.

Members will recall some of the main allocations made during the current financial year to date, including an allocation of £20 million capital to DSD to assist with the capital-receipt shortfall that the downturn in the housing market caused. That was provided in order to maintain the provision of social and affordable housing, and £6.5 million was also allocated for the special purchase of evacuated dwellings. Recently, DSD has been provided with the flexibility to move a further £10 million from other areas of its budget into its budget for social housing. Other allocations include £20 million capital for the farm nutrient management scheme, which will have a significant impact for the construction industry at this crucial time; £5 million to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for animal health; £700,000 assistance for the fishing industry; and £500,000 for flooding hardship.

Allocations to the Department of Education include £5 million for the extended schools programme; £4 million for school maintenance; and £2.6 million for part-time youth workers' pay arrears. An allocation of £15 million was made to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) under the first call on available resources, which was agreed as part of the 2008-2011 Budget. The Department of the Environment (DOE) was allocated £1.5 million for flood relief to local councils, £1.9 million capital for the Planning Service computer system, and £2 million for a shortfall in planning-application income.

An allocation of £6.2 million capital was made to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for Warrenpoint harbour. Other allocations include £2.5 million for roads' structural maintenance; £1.8 million for public-transport capital works; and £2.8 million capital and £500,000 resource for the Assembly.

It was agreed that in the 2008-2011 Budget, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would have flexibility to manage spending pressures in its own budget rather than declare reduced requirements and submit bids. That has allowed the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reduce prescription charges to £3 for each item from

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1 January 2009, something that I am sure that all Members welcome.

The past year was difficult, as there was an ever-tightening fiscal situation, which culminated in the economic downturn that has gripped the nation and the world. In December, the Executive responded to the economic difficulties with a £70 million package of measures designed to support local business — including the construction industry — and low-income households, which included the £15 million allocation to tackle fuel poverty. Members must not forget that in addition to that, the Estimates for 2008-09 include provision for approximately £2,500 million of social-security benefits and income support for the people of Northern Ireland.

It is important to listen to the construction industry's concerns. As well as bringing forward £9.4 million of investment into the current financial year, I announced in December that some £115 million of construction projects that were scheduled to go to the market via the frameworks will now proceed to tender by March 2009. Therefore, the delivery of projects is not being held back to cover some alleged hole in the 2008-09 Budget, as was claimed by some but has proven to be spurious. Total capital investment in 2008-09 is now expected to exceed £1.4 billion — that is a record for investment in local infrastructure.

Moreover, industrial rates have been frozen at 30%. Rates relief is being provided to those in the freight and transport sector, which is benefiting many of our important docks and transport companies. I have also announced further support to local business through further changes to the rating system, including a freeze on increases in business rates next year, as well as the introduction from 2010 of a rates-relief scheme for small businesses.

The Assembly and the Executive have presided over the delivery of services in Northern Ireland, expenditure for which totals almost £16,000 million in the current difficult financial year. Although there remains considerable scope for improvement over the current financial year, public services have continued in an effective manner, unforeseen issues have been addressed, and assistance has been given to local businesses — including in the construction industry — and to households that the economic downturn and fuel poverty have affected.

Turning from the current financial year and looking ahead to 2009-2010, the second resolution that is the Assembly seeks approval for the issue of a cash-and-resource Vote on Account to continue existing services in the early months of the next financial year until the Main Estimates and corresponding Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly. I want to make it clear that the Vote on Account is around 45% of the final

2008-09 provision for cash and resources, and is not based on the opening Budget position for 2009-2010 agreed in January last year as part of Budget 2008-2011. In addition, the Vote on Account is based not only on the departmental expenditure limit on which the Budget 2008-2011 focused, but on the £8 million of annually managed expenditure, a substantial proportion of which is spent on social security benefits.

I have to remind the House that failure to pass the Vote on Account resolution would have serious consequences for the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland beyond 31 March, and the electorate of Northern Ireland would not forgive the Assembly for jeopardising that expenditure.

As we look forward to the next financial year, and the predictions surrounding the global economy, we must recognise the difficult challenges that lie ahead for the Assembly and the Executive. We must work together to juggle competing proprieties within a finite Budget to deliver public services. The current economic situation highlights the importance of the Programme for Government, with its focus on the economy, and as we continue with its implementation, underpinned by the Budget and the investment strategy, endorsed by the Assembly, and endorsed unanimously in the Executive, we have the opportunity to steer Northern Ireland through the storm that is already battering our local economy and impacting on households.

Within our remit as a local devolved Administration, we have been able to respond to local needs, and we will continue to do that in future.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and his explanation of the context of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account. I wish to make some opening remarks on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and if time permits, to make some personal remarks. I will seek to indicate when that switch is being made, although Members may be able to tell by my more pronounced gesturing and pointing around the House.

At its meeting on 4 February 2009, the Committee took evidence from departmental officials on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09 and Vote on Account for 2009-2010. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the officials for helping us to navigate our way through, what are by necessity, detailed and complicated documents. That evidence session represented the culmination of a process of Committee scrutiny of the quarterly monitoring rounds, both strategically and in relation to the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) own position.

The Budget approved by the Assembly in January 2008 contained three-year plans for 2008-2011. The

spring Supplementary Estimates, Vote on Account and associated Budget Bill, which are considered annually by the Assembly each February, emanate from the agreed Budget. They give Departments the authority to spend, and they set control limits for Departments, through which the Assembly can hold Departments to account. The Committee has approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, which is to be introduced later today, and the Chairperson has written to the Speaker to confirm that.

In layman's terms, the spring Supplementary Estimates encapsulate the changes in departmental budgets, especially during the quarterly monitoring rounds. The spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09 seek the Assembly's approval for any additional resources and/or cash needed over and above what was detailed in the Main Estimates for 2008-09, approved by the Assembly in June 2008.

The spring Supplementary Estimates for this year include what is described as additional headroom in respect of a number of departmental Estimates, which will facilitate allocations in the February monitoring round. The headroom will cover changes since the December monitoring round and areas where Departments intend to bid for resources in February, provided such bids have been initially assessed as reasonable and are in areas to which the Executive may allocate funds, if available. This addresses the timing issue, in that the Budget Bill, containing both the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, needs Royal Assent before the end of March to allow Departments to have the legal authority to continue to spend in the early part of 2009-2010.

Departmental officials cannot, therefore, wait to finalise the Estimates until after the outcome of the February monitoring round has been announced in early March.

The headroom provision means that any funding that becomes available may be allocated in the February monitoring round, and the Estimates will then give Departments the capacity to take on and spend that money. If that headroom had not been built in, some of the Executive's recent decisions, such as the decision on actions to address fuel poverty, could not be implemented and accounted for in February.

When giving evidence to the Committee, DFP officials stated that that decision was not taken lightly, given the need for Estimates to be taut and realistic and written to the latest Budget position, which was agreed in December. However, given the decisions that the Executive have made since the December monitoring round, it was thought prudent to build in headroom for this year. The headroom will be used only if allocations are made in February and, therefore, does not pre-empt Executive decisions. Strict conditions have been laid

out, and the Minister may wish to reassure the Assembly on that matter later, when he gets a chance to do so.

Although total headroom of £342 million resource and £96 million capital has been built in, those amounts may not, in fact, be allocated in February. The headroom provision may ultimately reflect somewhat on the accuracy of the Estimates. However, the Committee welcomed the flexibility and transparency afforded by that approach, and DFP officials assured the Committee that they have asked Departments to inform their respective Committees of the headroom that has been built in to the Estimates.

In relation to budgetary changes that emanate from quarterly monitoring rounds, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has once again fulfilled an active scrutiny role throughout 2008-09. DFP officials have briefed the Committee on the Department's position before each monitoring round and have provided in-depth written responses to the queries raised. Following the Minister's plenary statement on the outcomes of each monitoring round, DFP officials responsible for central finance have briefed the Committee on the strategic and cross-cutting issues that relate to public expenditure.

The Committee worked with DFP officials to develop a standardised format for monitoring-round information to facilitate Committee scrutiny of departmental submissions, and it is conducting an inquiry into the scrutiny of the Executive's Budget and expenditure. Stage three of that inquiry will review the in-year monitoring process, and in that regard, the Committee welcomes the fact that DFP is committed to its own review of the process, which is to be completed by the end of March. The outcome of that review will feed into the Committee's inquiry. DFP officials have assured the Committee that movements of money during monitoring rounds are scrutinised — initially by DFP and subsequently by the Executive — to ensure that the Executive's priorities in the Programme for Government have been put to the fore.

The previous Minister of Finance and Personnel outlined three possible reasons for the return of funds by Departments: greater than planned efficiency; the overstating of resource needs upfront; or a failure to deliver the planned level of public services. I, therefore, repeat the call that was made last year for Statutory Committees to examine the resources returned by their respective Departments and to question why they have been released and whether they have been returned at the earliest possible opportunity. Returning money on a large scale must inevitably affect delivery, and the information base must be improved centrally to measure that effect and to facilitate DFP's strategic challenge function, especially in examining whether Departments are overstating resource needs when bidding for particular programmes.

I will now turn to the motion on the Vote on Account for 2009-2010. It is a practical measure that provides for the sums needed to enable public services to continue during the early part of the financial year until the Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill are debated before the summer. I, therefore, support both motions.

I now wish to make some comments in a personal capacity. I reiterate my comment about the seriousness of the debate. We often hear the media and the public say that the House does not debate serious enough issues. However, the budgetary process is the most serious issue that we can debate, and we will discuss it today, in the two motions before the House, and tomorrow, in the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Those are serious issues in serious times. I would suggest that it is no time for silly stunts. Mr Speaker, I would praise you in your wisdom if you were to rule as out of order — if it is appropriate — the frivolous silly stunt that is the attempt to cut a penny from the Estimates. That sort of stunt would be more befitting Fawcett's Circus than this Assembly. Just think of the amount of paper that was printed to inform Members of that attempt. It cost more to print that paper than would have been saved had a penny been taken off the Estimates and the Vote on Account. Indeed, if the Members who put the amendment forward had been strangely convincing enough to persuade the majority of Members to support their silly idea, infinitely more than a penny would have been spent on reproducing the very thick Estimates document, which is published every year and which, of course, would have needed adjusting.

Regardless of future Budgets or Budget processes, Members need to get a grip of themselves. I cannot predict what Members will do, but I have a fairly good idea of how some parties in the House will behave later today, and they need to get a grip of what is before us. We are debating last year's Budget, which, as I said, was agreed by the vast majority of Members. Today, we are trying to formalise our in-year monitoring process and provide what is known in the vernacular as a "cash float" for Departments for the next year so that they can continue with their business.

12.30 pm

Members attempted to table an amendment seeking to reduce departmental budgets by a penny. What they really want to do is to reduce departmental budgets by more than just a penny. Their calls for the re-writing, or wholesale redrafting, of budgets would have to be financed by taking money from other Departments, given that there is no new money, and no desire in any part of the House to raise money in the midst of a recession through increased rates or other measures. It must be pointed out that some of the vital public services that Members cry about needing more money

would be hit significantly by such a reduction, such as the Education Department, which spends huge sums, or the Health Department, which receives around 50% of the total Budget.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way providing that the Member bears in mind the time that I have left to speak.

Mr B McCrea: I take the Member's point about frivolous motions on board. In the area that he has responsibility for, is it likely that Land and Property Services will implement a new strategy for rating reform that incorporates IT replacement? Will savings be made in the areas that have been identified, such as IT staff, software licences and maintenance? Will he be able to make the savings from accommodation and staff restructuring?

Mr Hamilton: I have absolute confidence in the ability of the Minister and his team to deliver on those matters. I thank the Member for promoting me — I am not responsible for anything. That is a question to ask the Minister at a later date.

I am glad that the frivolous amendment was rejected. Did the Members who tried to table that amendment ask their Minister — the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — if he would be happy for £500 million to be taken from his budget to pay for their ideas.

Mr Speaker: Will Members check that their mobile phones are switched off? Someone is operating a mobile phone, or has one switched on, which is affecting the audio equipment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for arriving late. I am glad, as always, to speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. The Committee has noted the Department for Employment and Learning submissions to DFP, and I will make some observations on the Department's reduced requirements.

As Members are aware, the Committee has previously stated that it has issues with the Department's underspends, which it has discussed in its meetings with the Minister and his departmental officials. The Committee notes that, although underspends for individual projects and programmes appear relatively small in comparison with the Department's allocation in this monitoring round, they are significant as a proportion of the budgets of certain projects and programmes.

From its discussions with officials, the Committee has ascertained that underspends on some skills and work-readiness demand-led programmes are associated with time lags before participation becomes mandatory for clients. For example, in this monitoring round, the

Department is showing a reduced requirement of almost £700,000 for the Steps to Work programme, which has arisen because demand for that programme has not reached expected levels. That is because it is not mandatory for 18- to 24-year-olds to enter the programme until they have been on jobseeker's allowance for six months. In addition, that period is 18 months for those aged 25 and over, which is something that the Committee queries.

As a result of the time lag and our knowledge that the number of unemployed people has risen dramatically in the recession, the Committee expects that funding levels for that and other Department demand-led programmes on unemployment will have to rise. We emphasise that to the Finance Minister and urge him to be forthcoming with funds for those important programmes when increases are required. The Executive are also considering that matter.

At the same time, the Committee highlighted to the Department that investment in upskilling and reskilling the workforce must continue if we are to take the best advantage of the economic upswing when it comes. A highly skilled workforce will attract foreign direct investment and other investment. The Committee would support any funding bids that the Department might make for such programmes. We remind the Minister of Finance of the commitments in the Programme for Government with regard to upskilling and reskilling the workforce.

The Committee notes that a number of the Department's reduced requirements arise from unfilled vacancies, and we are concerned that the Department is unable to fill those vacancies in this time of recession. We urge the Finance Minister to take note of the prevalence of the Departments that are making reduced requirements because of unfilled vacancies. If those vacancies remain because of skills-gap issues, that matter must be addressed. It is appropriate that the Finance Minister should address those issues with his Executive colleagues, including the Minister for Employment and Learning.

We also ask the Finance Minister to be particularly aware of reduced requirements across the Department resulting from slippage on capital projects. The Committee for Employment and Learning has taken the lead on the issue, and we wrote to all the Statutory Committees and their Ministers urging that capital projects not be allowed to slip and, where possible, pushed forward.

The construction industry has been one of the worst-hit industries in the recession, and the Committee is concerned that if the situation is allowed to continue, we will lose many skilled workers to projects abroad, setting back the construction industry by years. As always, the Department can depend on the

fact that the Committee will be supportive of its budget judgements when appropriate, but there should be no mistake that the Committee has sharp teeth and a keen sense of smell, and we will be looking closely at all the financial arrangements that come before us. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McNarry: The Ulster Unionist Party will not be supporting the Minister today. Our unanimous view is that what may have worked when the initial Programme for Government was approved is not working today. Therefore, we cannot endorse what the Minister asks the House to support, as it is not in Northern Ireland's best interests. That has been our consistent view. We recognise that the Minister is also being consistent, albeit consistently wrong. It is a difference of opinion between us.

The chasm is as deep as the hole that the Minister oversees in an out-of-sync Budget, coupled to an unfit-for-purpose Programme for Government. We have consistently asked the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: We have consistently asked the Minister to show us the evidence and the outworkings to which he gives credibility, to demonstrate that what was workable in a recession-free period holds good in today's recession-riddled times and to convince the people who are desperately trying to keep a roof over their heads and a business solvent that what the Assembly votes for today will really impact on, and make a difference to, their lives and to their places of work.

Furthermore, we would like the Minister to explain why the dysfunctional, delusional direction pursued through the financial conduits of the Department keep turning into a blind alley. Last year's routes are blocked, and we do not hear solutions — only the re-cooking of last year's recipe. If the Minister intends to take his party and his Sinn Féin soulmates down the tubes of a rollercoaster of financial folly, be my guest, but he will not be taking the Ulster Unionists with him.

Let us take a good look at the Department's lamentable performance under the Minister's watch. When I have finished, perhaps he will tell me if he were in my position, would he vote for more of the same — targets in disarray, too many key components running into the ground.

The Minister has lost control of spending. There is no strategy attached to the strategic stocktake. Shortfalls of the dimension now exposed will not be met by in-year monitoring, efficiency savings or reliance on underspends. One day the Minister boasted of a letter dispatched to Ministers warning them not to overspend, but in a press statement last Friday, the Minister had crawled back into conceding his dependency on underspending. He even introduced the abandoning of projects. Which is it to be: Departments tilting at

overspends, or Departments handing money back from underspends? I will come back to that issue.

What is all this about cutting projects? Will the Minister reveal which projects he intends to axe? Surely they cannot include road improvement: DRD spends 18% of what is spent on road repairs in England. He cannot axe the £22 million of capital spent on infrastructure projects that has already been kicked into the next financial year. What are the projects that the Minister intends to cut, and how do they relate to this debate?

The Minister inhabits his own monetary world, in which shortfalls are called “pressures” and new money is called “easement”. It is a world of euphemisms.

How is the Minister feeling today? Is he comfortable with how the past year has worked out? Are targets safe and set for delivery on time? Is enough being done to reduce costs? What new ideas does he have for minimising costs and maximising outcomes? I pose those questions because the Minister has cocooned himself in systematic denial.

Who is to blame for the millions of pounds overlooked in the collection of rates? Who was at fault for the £200 million lost in the sale of the Crossnacreevy plant-testing station? Is £100 million — or is it nearer £200 million — that is balanced precariously over civil servants’ pay claim? That will mean a sizeable extension of our loan capacity when the money is borrowed. Is it possible to borrow money from the Treasury for that purpose? Can the Minister guarantee that those claims will be met? How does he intend to pay back that loan to the Treasury, and what will be the repayment timescale?

Furthermore, there is the remarkable debacle of Workplace 2010, whereby an estimated £175 million of revenue was lost due to what is best described as incomprehensible incompetence of the worst kind. Was £10 million, £12 million or £14 million spent on consultants and some kind of golden project under finders-minders fees? Will the Minister tell us who the lucky recipients were? Having apparently wasted those millions and lost out on the £175 million in revenue, will he tell us who took the decision to mothball the Workplace 2010 project? Will he confirm that, long before the decision to pull the plug was taken, his Department was aware that the two final competitive bidders were already engaged in talks about a merger?

Is that not a disgrace? Not only has some £14 million that was spent on dubious fees been wasted, but more than £175 million of revenue has been kissed goodbye, and another project has been abandoned — for refurbishment, so I hear. I wonder where the money will come from to tackle worn-out buildings and office supplies.

Those are not pressures; the roof is caving in. At least Obama had the grace to admit that he “screwed

up”. The Minister is in retreat. He is totally reliant on underspend and hopes that the historic inadequacies of the Departments will be repeated. That is a solution over which the Minister should not stand, because such posturing is an indictment of the ineffectiveness of the financial machine for which he is solely responsible.

Yet the Minister does not come to the House short of advice, some of which is bound to have made to him many of the points that I have been banging on about for the past five months; he need only read the newspapers and the economists’ forecasts. Perhaps he does not do that. There is no chance of reducing child poverty by 2011, and little chance of a 50% growth in creative agencies, realising £120 million of private-sector investment or creating 6,500 new jobs. We must not forget that, just around the corner, are water charges, and now, we are told, the financing of policing and justice — another deal.

The republican/DUP show goes on. They can vote in or out whatever they can agree on, and the record shows that they agree on a great deal. However, despite their power, their control of the purse strings and of most of the Departments, they, like the figures, fall short on solutions.

There has been talk that in some of the advice offered to the Minister there is a proposal that could bring £50 million into his kitty — by way of the DUP and Sinn Féin agreeing to a 1% freeze on public-sector salary increases and ending bonus payments to senior civil servants. Does the Minister intend to put such a recommendation into action today?

12.45 pm

We are dealing with a document of substantial reading, complete with the potential for serious consequences for the Finance Minister and those who control the Executive. It is a worthy piece of work, and its author is no secret. Somewhat mysteriously, however, it is stamped: “embargoed until further notice”. Can the Minister tell us who commissioned that work, who placed that strange embargo on it, and when will it be lifted? Has that restriction got anything to do with today’s debate? What does the Minister intend to do with it?

The Minister has made an about-turn on underspending. In the interest of public confidence, will the Minister outline where he stands on underspending? Will he detail any urgent measures that he is considering but, so far, has not disclosed? That is another good reason why we will not be supporting the Minister.

Mr O’Loan: The Assembly is — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Loan: I nearly had the floor, hopefully, I have now. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr O'Loan: The Assembly is certainly well aware of the concerns — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. All Members who want to speak in this debate will have an opportunity to do so.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the clock will be brought back to zero.

The Assembly is well aware of the concerns that the SDLP has about the budgetary process. It was our desire for a full Budget process in order to respond in a significant way to the economic downturn. However, we recognise the importance of the Vote on Account in providing the money for Departments for the next year, and therefore we will not be seeking to divide the Assembly on that matter. I hope that that will provide the opportunity for a reasoned and reasonable debate on the issues. It is in that spirit — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr O'Loan: I am sure that the timekeepers will note that my time is being severely limited.

Within the strategic stocktake, £1 billion of pressures were not provided for; in response, we were told that half of those pressures are likely to disappear like chaff in the wind. In a previous debate, I pointed out that a number of those issues did not look to me like chaff in the wind. In response, the Minister gave the Mr Micawber answer that something will turn up. Although we hope that something will turn up, we feel that more is needed.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I involuntarily gave way a number of times and I need the time that is available. If there is time at the end I will give way, but I doubt that that will be the case.

There are question marks around the deliverability of the current Budget, and the capital asset realisation is a major concern. The investment strategy is very dependent on that, and that problem has not been quantified. I would be grateful if the Minister would address that concern. A further major issue — little discussed — is PFIs, on which the investment strategy is very dependent. There is a banking crisis and, surely, those PFIs must be dependent on funds coming forward from the banks. Again, no information has been forthcoming on the consequences of that for the investment strategy.

I say directly to the Minister; if he is aware of issues of concern around the delivery of the Budget, I believe that he is under a duty to tell us now, even if those issues have not been fully quantified.

It concerns me greatly — and the Assembly should have been even more concerned than it was — that the equal pay issue was known to the Minister concerned six months before he presented the Budget statement but the Assembly was never given any indication of it. That type of situation should not happen again.

The strategic stocktake document quantifies the deferment of water charges as £2 million being lost from the Budget over the two-year period. It has been estimated that the equal pay issue will cost at least £100 million in back pay. Perhaps that has been provided for, but I want to ask more about that. If there is anything in excess of that £100 million, it has not been allowed or provided for. That is a recurrent theme.

I want to talk about the £900 million that has been talked about and presented as new funds from the Treasury. It is not new money; £800 million of it is simply extra money that would have been charged in relation to the accountancy rules because of the deferment of water charges. The Treasury has simply said that it will absorb that; it is not new money for the Northern Ireland block. We believe that the £100 million is for equal pay, and I would be glad if the Minister could confirm that. Does that money have to be repaid in due course? If it has to be repaid, no money at all is being made available to the block.

In the downturn, it is possible that the rate receipts will not make the values that had been predicted. I know all about the increased sums that are coming from what were previously thought to be vacant properties. In the pre-Budget report, the Chancellor talked about a further £5 billion being taken out of Budgets as a result of further efficiencies. Barnett consequentials could follow from that.

Previously, I quoted a departmental official who referred to programmes having run their course and needing adjustment in the light of the present economic downturn. That amplifies the SDLP's real concerns about whether the economic downturn is being responded to adequately. I noticed that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was asked about that during Question Time last week, and she did not give a lot of an answer. She referred to information seminars, and I give credit to the initiatives that Invest Northern Ireland (INI) is carrying out. I noticed the elaboration of that initiative from INI's recent publication, and that it is doing significant work to give support to companies through current difficulties.

However, I do not think that enough is being done. Other countries have substantial measures on reskilling and on the upgrading of skills in response to unemployment. That must be replicated, but new measures are not being introduced in line with those. I worry that strategic focus is being lost, that not much is being

done about the current situation and that we are losing sight of the bigger picture.

On 4 February 2009, in a letter to the Committee for Finance and Personnel about what the Department is doing about Varney II, DFP stated:

“On the specific request for a paper on progress, this has been overtaken by external events, particularly the fact that the economic climate is now materially different from when Sir David Varney produced his Review in April 2008. The Executive is now focussed on putting in place measures to address the economic downturn.”

I do not see a lot of measures in relation to the economic downturn, and I am worried by the shift in focus and the fact that we seem to be losing sight of what needs to be done about the bigger picture and the longer term.

Invest Northern Ireland says that Northern Ireland is now placed 113 out of 203 regions in the EU25 for innovation. That is the lowest place of any UK region. It says that Northern Ireland lags behind the UK average for entrepreneurial activity. Those are fundamental challenges, which can be summed up in one word: “competitiveness”. The global economy has been greatly shaken in recent times, but it remains a global economy, and the only future for Northern Ireland is to compete in that global economy. We need to know that the Minister has his focus on that, but that does not necessarily seem to be the case.

The First Minister, when he was Minister of Finance, said that there was no escalator and that we must use the stairs — the trouble is that nobody is pointing to the staircase any more. At present, the fundamental direction must come, in particular, from the Minister of Finance. We are living through a contemporary crisis that must be ridden out, but we must keep our eye on what will happen to our companies, businesses and society after the crisis.

Mr Speaker, you and Members might have noticed that, thus far, I have not mentioned the word “housing”. I rest my remarks on that innovative note.

Dr Farry: The motions provide, as Mr Hamilton said, a very important opportunity for the Assembly to debate the nature and level of public expenditure in Northern Ireland. At the outset, I declare my intention to criticise the Minister and the Executive. However, my party is a constructive opposition party and it does not intend to divide the House on the motions.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: I wonder what Ulster Unionist Members are playing at, because the simple fact is that if the motions are not approved, Departments — including the two that are headed by Ministers from the Ulster Unionist Party — will have no money to spend from 1 April 2009. I wonder whether the Ulster Unionist tactic has been approved by those Ministers, who must have signed up to the motions when they were discussed

in the Executive. The Alliance Party does not have such complications.

It is important to acknowledge that the debate is even more important in the context of the economic downturn. Even the Alliance Party concedes that the global economic crisis is certainly not the Executive’s fault, but there are important issues to which the Executive must attend.

There are two broad questions — first, are the Executive doing everything within their power to mitigate the effect of the economic downturn on Northern Ireland? Indeed, the Executive may have particular responsibilities in that respect. Secondly, are the Executive doing enough to rebalance and modernise our economy in order to ensure that Northern Ireland is best placed to take advantage of recovery, once it comes? My party has had major concerns from the outset about whether the Budget and the Programme for Government are fit for purpose. Those questions are even more acute today.

I, like Mr O’Loan, believe that contradictory messages are being sent. The Executive have said that there is no need to reform or revise the Programme for Government (PFG) or the Budget because both already prioritise the economy. However, the Varney II Report was dismissed by the Executive on the grounds that they were already committed to the recommendations in that report. As Mr O’Loan said, the Executive are saying that they can no longer implement the recommendations in the Varney II Report because events have overtaken them. That surely begs the question — of the Minister and of the Executive — have events not also overtaken the Programme for Government and the Budget?

We have been unhappy with a number of the spending changes made in the course of the year, because we do not believe that they adequately address the issues that face us. *[Interruption]*

If Basil McCrea wants me to give way, he is more than welcome to ask. He is saving himself for later, OK.

We must take account of how other national and regional governments around the world are responding to the economic downturn. Last week, the US Congress passed an \$800 billion stimulus for the US economy. In December last year, the UK Government passed a stimulus worth around £20 billion. Our Scottish counterparts — a regional Government with similar powers to our own — have provided their own stimulus in the context of their powers and responsibilities. The Scottish Parliament’s forthcoming Budget Bill makes provision for £227 million of capital expenditure, including £120 million for affordable housing.

Unfortunately, I have not included much on housing in my speech, because I assumed that Declan O’Loan would cover that gap, but there we go.

1.00 pm

It is interesting that in the Scottish Government's response to the Council of Economic Advisers' first annual report, Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond, said:

"As Scotland's government our responsibility is to prioritise action that, in the short term, mitigates the impact of the downturn while shaping policy that, in the longer term, ensures Scotland not only recovers, but emerges stronger".

Certainly, I do not often agree with Alex Salmond. However, his remark hits the nail on the head as regards what a regional Government should do. I am disappointed not to have heard such rhetoric from Northern Ireland's Ministers.

Similarly, the Irish Government, Germany and Canada have engaged in stimulus activities that tend to share four key elements: to bring forward investment; to increase social housing; to develop the green economy; and to introduce tax incentives, which are usually targeted. There has not been much meaningful action on those issues in Northern Ireland.

As regards investment, I note that the Finance Minister has promised capital spend of £1.4 billion during the current financial year and has pointed out that that is a record figure. It is a net figure from the Budget. However, examination of the investment strategy and gross figures leads one to anticipate that, in budgetary terms, around £5.4 billion of Northern Ireland's money, with a potential additional £450 million, will be spent during the current three-year period. That amounts to at least £1.8 billion each year. Therefore, investment is already £400 million less than what the investment strategy suggested should be spent on capital during the current financial year.

Mr Hamilton: I understand the Member's point. I am glad that he has, at least, finessed some of the arguments that he has made previously in the media with regard to investment of £1.4 billion versus £1.8 billion. Will he accept that net investment of £1.4 billion is still a record level of investment in infrastructure, is far in excess of the £1.1 billion that was invested in 2007, and is, therefore, positive for Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: Certainly, I will concede that the Executive are moving forward in the right direction: £1.4 billion is much more than has been spent previously. However, it is not as much as the Executive's own documentation sets out. The issue is whether capital is actually being spent. Obviously, a spend on capital can have a major impact; it can not only improve Northern Ireland's infrastructure, but provide people with jobs in the short term. Members must be mindful of that. The Assembly has slipped back on social housing opportunities. Indeed, that debate is probably for another place.

There has certainly not been any rhetoric, let alone action, from the Executive on exploiting opportunities

to develop the green economy through energy efficiency and renewable energies. Energy costs are, perhaps, the single biggest issue for households and businesses alike. Certainly, although I recognise and support the £150 winter fuel payments — which, I hope, will be paid during winter, rather than spring — it is worth recognising that moneys invested in energy efficiency in housing could save money in the long term for vulnerable people, such as pensioners and others who are fuel poor. Therefore, rather than focusing on a one-year initiative, a longer-term view must be taken. Obviously, to make energy efficiency improvements to homes will provide people with jobs, which is important.

Around 10% of the US stimulus is linked to the green economy. The UK stimulus also has a heavy emphasis on the green economy, but has been criticised widely by several groups for being insufficient. Both of those policies, however, are ahead of those of Northern Ireland.

I am critical of the Executive's approach towards tax incentives, not only as regards opportunity costs for public expenditure that arise from some of them, but also the danger that there is too much focus on the spending power of individual households to stimulate the economy. In a recession, the risk is that people will save money, rather than go out and spend it. I am not sure that the right balance has been struck between short-term consumer spending and the broader question of longer-term investment for the good of the economy. The Alliance Party disagrees strongly with the Executive on that issue. My party shares many people's concerns about overall public expenditure and whether the Budget is capable of delivering.

We have not had fiscal stimulus on the scale of many of our neighbours', and that is a pity. We have a very tight public expenditure situation, which the Executive did not inherit. The cost of division and of managing a divided society has constrained our ability to redirect public funds. However, the Executive's actions and decisions have lessened spending flexibility even further. They have taken a populist rather than a prudent approach.

I note with regret the decision to defer water charges for two years. That may, in itself, be the right thing to do, but, before that decision was taken, no consideration was given to where the money that will allow water charges to be deferred is to come from. Much criticism has been levelled at parties that have made suggestions without outlining from where the money will come, yet the Executive have done exactly that. They have taken a decision that is not covered by the Programme for Government without saying from where the money will come. There must be a single standard in the Chamber.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for bringing the Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly, and thus

providing the opportunity for this debate. We look forward to another financial year with many opportunities, and we realise that some difficult choices will have to be made. However, we must congratulate the Executive on their accomplishments so far this year.

We are well aware that the Supplementary Estimates do not depend on figures alone. They depend on delivery, together with a strong, sound stewardship of the public's money. Those are our responsibilities as custodians of the public purse. With the allocation of resources to the various Departments, particularly the Department of Finance and Personnel, the prioritisation of reforms and the modernisation of public services should ensure that front line services are efficient and deliver the best level of service for all communities in Northern Ireland.

I place on record my thanks to the Minister for securing an extra £100 million from the Treasury to deal with public servants' equal pay dispute, which I hope can be brought to a successful conclusion in the near future. We must improve transportation networks, but we also have a responsibility to take great care to protect our natural environment and to develop sustainable energy. That responsibility led to the recent establishment of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the introduction of Planning Policy Statement 21, which will help rural dwellers and rural businesspeople.

The investment to support the economy, and the development and maintenance of transportation networks throughout Northern Ireland, should improve economic productivity and prosperity when the economy recovers. Members of our older generation can now avail themselves of the improved transportation networks for free, but they need further encouragement to do so. We also managed to reduce the number of road deaths in Northern Ireland in 2008 to 106.

Reflecting on last year's Supplementary Estimates, I hope that the capital investment issued to the Department for Social Development during the past financial year will lead to more social housing's being made available to the various communities that now live in Northern Ireland. I am pleased that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has provided one of the biggest health budgets that Northern Ireland has ever had. Indeed, that has allowed the Minister of Health to reduce prescription charges, and I hope that prescription charges can be eliminated in the near future.

The implementation of the Programme for Government, the Budget and the investment strategy can ensure that we have a strong local economy, improved infrastructure and improved public services in future. Let us vote unanimously on the spending priorities and work for all communities in Northern Ireland, now and in future. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh dhíospóireacht an lae inniu. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure heard from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 on 5 February 2009. During the evidence session with departmental officials, the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments that affected spending profiles as the year progressed.

The Committee took an active scrutiny role throughout the 2008-09 budgetary year. The Department briefed the Committee on its position before each monitoring round and provided detailed written responses to queries that Committee members raised. On all occasions, the Committee robustly challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and surrendering resources.

The Committee notes that the DCAL spring Supplementary Estimates detail the plan to decrease provision of the £10 million that was originally allocated to a multi-sports stadium. Of course, the Committee has a particular interest in that issue. We have written to Minister Campbell to ask that he appear before the Committee to explain his plans for disbursing that money and his decision on the multi-sports stadium.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure will continue to prioritise its scrutiny of the Department's budget management. In fact, the Committee recently commissioned the Department to arrange a finance seminar in order to explain all aspects of the Budget process, including the spring Supplementary Estimates. That proved to be a useful exercise, and I encourage other Statutory Committees that have not already done so to explore that possibility.

As Cathaoirleach of the Committee, I want to declare that the Committee still believes that the overall allocation to DCAL is inadequate. The Department is still suffering from the legacy of the past, in which the Government have consistently undervalued the contribution that sport and the arts make to health, the economy, tourism, and so on.

In a personal capacity, I welcome the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments on the farm nutrient management scheme, which has inherent environmental and agricultural value. People in the agriculture sector have told me that it is an important initiative that will generate work for the construction industry. I want to repeat my stance on the multi-sports stadium: the decision represents a missed opportunity, has wasted huge potential for the construction industry and suggests that the Minister lacks vision and a long-term strategy for sport.

I invite other parties to support Sinn Féin's call for greater fiscal powers, including tax-varying powers, for the Assembly. In the past, that has not always happened, and it is a matter of regret.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will be absolutely clear: Northern Ireland's economy comes first. That simple remark trips off the tongue. However, a few years ago, the economy was not the Government's priority, and most people on the opposite side of the House claimed that Northern Ireland's economy was a basket case that could not be repaired.

I welcome the fact that all but one party in the Chamber appear to recognise that Northern Ireland's economy is the priority and is — and must remain — top of the agenda in the Programme for Government, not because of an ideological need but because the people of Northern Ireland want the economy to come first. I am delighted that the Government, through the Budget and the Supplementary Estimates, are focused on channelling resources, energy and priorities towards putting the economy and the needs of the people first. That should be the Government's key priority.

I am concerned at the isolationist view that was espoused by the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry. I am disappointed at the suggestion that we should isolate the issue and, rather than put the economy first, that we should have different priorities. The Ulster Unionist Party wanted to table an amendment that encouraged Members to vote against the Minister's proposals. Although all Members accept the ping-pong nature of politics in the House, it would be utter folly not to proceed with the Government's key priority — which was agreed by all Executive Ministers who represent the four key parties — to put Northern Ireland's economy first. We must drive forward and deliver on the priorities that have already been agreed. We must put our hands to the plough, push forward, not look back and plough a straight and solid furrow for the people of Northern Ireland.

In the past, a bright idea was mooted to sell Stormont and lease it back. I am delighted that that bright idea has been switched off.

A big claim was made this morning that the Minister has lost control of the Budget. That is utter nonsense. The spending supplement indicates control of the Budget, directed towards the key priority of making Northern Ireland work.

1.15 pm

Let us look at the facts. They speak for themselves, but they should be spelt out loudly and clearly: over the next three years, £612 million is allocated to road infrastructure and road building. That will create employment, generate spend in the economy, and take the economy forward. Some £647 million is allocated to developing water infrastructure. That will create

jobs, drive the economy forward, and address some of the employment issues that our country, like other parts of the United Kingdom, and, indeed, the world, are facing today.

Some £565 million is allocated to primary healthcare and hospital modernisation, and £855 million is allocated to schools and colleges. That spells out a very impressive Budget; indeed, it is a plan for investment of £1.4 billion to £1.5 billion for this year, and will rise to £1.7 billion over the next year, and £2 billion over the following year. That is an impressive spending agenda over the next three years, aimed at putting the economy first, driving employment forward, creating growth in the economy and making sure that Northern Ireland is a success.

It is disappointing that some people want to pour cold water on those efforts, and want to turn their eyes against them. It is disappointing when people want to turn their eyes against spending that sort of money, and allocating it to projects in our own constituencies, which will affect us all. In the spending estimate, £265 million in health and social services will go towards building and improving health facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, Downe Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and Craigavon. That does not affect just parts of the Province; it covers every bit of it, ensuring that we are seeing that money spent all over the Province.

Some £127 million has been invested in the Belfast sewers project; £89 million in waste-water treatment projects; £83 million in four major projects delivered by the Department for Employment and Learning; and £200 million in 14 projects being constructed by the education and library boards.

Therefore, I appeal to the Ulster Unionist Party to return to the position that its own leader espoused less than two weeks ago on 'The Politics Show' — and I hope we are on air now — when Jim Fitzpatrick made the point that the Programme for Government is barely a year old, and it is clear now that it is dead in the water. Sir Reg Empey rightly replied that he would not accept that. He said he believed that a lot of the priorities had been set, such as putting the economy top of the list, which was the first time that that had been done in a Programme for Government. That that was the right place for it to be, that he did not accept Mr Fitzpatrick's position at all, and that he was wrong.

Well, I hope that that becomes the position of the Ulster Unionist Party today, and that it holds firmly to that, because otherwise it would send out all the wrong signals to ordinary Ulster men and Ulster women who want to see political unity when it comes to creating employment and driving the economy forward. I hope that the Ulster Unionist Party reflects on the position that has been espoused this morning by the Member

from Strangford Mr McNarry and that it follows this particular leader of the party at this particular time.

Finally, it has been spelt out very clearly that the Departments have indicated 60 new projects during the current financial year. That is an aggregated value in excess of £400 million. Those projects will be advertised by the end of this financial year, and some will have commenced. They include the South Eastern Regional College in Bangor, at a value of £10 million; 10 schools, ranging in value from just under £2 million to the Magherafelt High School project with a value of £11 million. In addition to that £400 million, Roads Service is scheduled to commence the procurement of a new A5 western corridor from Aghnacloy to Londonderry, which will represent an investment of some £600 million. That is an impressive work programme. In fact, there is very little else that could be done.

I note that, even today, the SDLP got away from its mantra of “just build houses”. I accept that housing projects are one key element of moving things forward, but they are not the be-all and end-all answer. Judging by its silence today, the SDLP has recognised the fact that it is those other infrastructure projects — not the one-trick pony of building social houses — that will make the lion’s share of a difference to Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Minister’s statement and look forward to the rest of the debate. I hope that it will be recognised that if what is proposed in the motions is to go forward, all the parties that endorsed, voted for and approved the Budget last year, and added to the value of this supplementary spending programme, should walk through the Lobbies and support what the Minister of Finance and Personnel is doing. They should get behind him and ensure that our economy is delivered and that Ulster comes first.

Mr B McCrea: It is indeed a privilege and an honour to follow the great Ian Paisley Junior — former junior Minister, former Executive member and former lots of things. I have previously recognised his expertise on land and property and all sorts of things.

I am not sure that we are dealing with the real issues today. I fear that the wheels are about to come off the cart. I say that because I was at a meeting last week with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), which is an illustrious organisation that is full of good people, all of whom are worried about money and whether there is enough to keep its member organisations going. I hear concern from the private sector, many parts of which are experiencing wage cuts and three-day weeks. There is a real problem.

In an attempt to put things into perspective — and Mr Farry encouraged us to look at the international example — I am told that if President Obama’s fiscal stimulus package were to be imagined as a stack of \$1,000 bills, it would be eight miles high. I was told by

some illustrious people at that meeting with NICVA that the Obama package is not nearly enough; it is only 10% of what is required.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel talked about people working together; I am interested in that proposal, but if we are to do so, it is important that we understand all the facts and figures. I am concerned that when we look at the background of deteriorating public finances, those facts and figures cannot help but have an impact. In his pre-Budget report in 2008, Alastair Darling said:

“having carefully considered the extent and the limits of efficiency savings, today I can announce the Government will now find an additional £5 billion of efficiencies in 2010/11.”

If we have to take our share of that, I am sorry to say that there will be difficult decisions to make.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will you propose that?

Mr B McCrea: Yes, but if it happens, it is a difficulty, is it not?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: For you.

Mr B McCrea: Absolutely. The issue, since the Minister brings it up — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I will talk about public-sector spending, as the Minister has brought it to our attention. The Government are now projecting much slower growth in public spending over their next spending review than in any previous years; slower even than that experienced during the 18 years of Conservative Governments from 1979 to 1997. In real terms, the increase in growth of 1.1% a year would represent a cut in public-sector spending. The squeeze on Whitehall Departments may be even more severe, given plausible scenarios for security and tax-credit costs.

For those Members who have not yet talked about housing, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, in its Green Budget 2009, said:

“Capital-intensive departments, such as transport and housing, are likely to suffer more than most due to the planned cash freeze on investment spending.”

There are some other issues for Westminster.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way when I have finished this point.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Just on that point about the Estimates.

Mr B McCrea: That was not a yes, but as it is Mr Paisley Jnr.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I appreciate the Member giving way. It is clear that some of the issues that the Member mentioned are not even covered by the Spring

Supplementary Estimates, because they are Northern Ireland Budget matters. Northern Ireland Estimates do not cover the provision of the Northern Ireland Office on the three matters that the Member mentioned. There should be some recognition of what we are debating today.

Mr B McCrea: When a Member gives way it is, normally, for a helpful intervention, and I suppose that that is stretching things a wee bit. The point of the matter is that I fear — however it is dressed up — that we do not have sufficient money to meet our obligations. I have asked —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr B McCrea: Please just let me finish.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, Mr Speaker.

Dr Farry: He is in bad humour today.

Mr B McCrea: The Speaker?

Dr Farry: No; you.

Mr B McCrea: The issue is about whether we have sufficient money to meet our obligations. I look at the planned efficiency savings for the Department for Social Development, for the Department of Education, and for the Department of Finance and Personnel itself and I fear that they are not going to be met.

All that I ask is that the Minister provides some sort of steer about whether or not we have a problem. If we have a problem, it is incumbent on all Members to identify the issues and to work together to try to resolve that problem, because if tough decisions have to be taken, that can be done only through consensus. Only if we all agree that there is a problem, and only if we all agree that cuts have to be made, can cuts be made. However, if we do not have to make cuts, that is great and let us say so.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his honesty. He, at least, is a shining light on his Benches in that he freely admits to the fact that the outworkings of what he and his colleagues are suggesting are cuts to existing Budget lines.

Has the Member spoken to his party colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and worked with him to help to identify lines for cutting? Furthermore, if the Member is talking now about difficulties that are being faced with budgets, how difficult will it be for Departments by the summer, if he and his colleagues persuade a majority of Members to stop funding for Departments, which will be the consequence of their voting against the motion today?

Mr B McCrea: The issue, as the Member well knows — and I can quote Gershwin; sorry, that is a piano player. I mean the other guy. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Does the Member mean Gershon?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the House for its help on that. However, Sir Peter Gershon warned, in 2004, that there was a point at which front line public services would be affected by efficiencies. However, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer vowed that he would not go beyond the savings identified.

Therefore, let us be honest about this issue. If 80% of our budgets are largely, so to speak, people-orientated, there comes a point when, if efficiencies are driven home against a backdrop of rising costs and a failure to take in those efficiencies, a situation will be created whereby the ends of the rope do not meet. I do not want to get to that situation. I want to understand the challenges that we face so that we can find a way to deal with them.

As part of my remit with regard to education, I note that one of the Department's efficiencies is to reallocate or reduce staffing numbers to reflect the demographic downturn. I also note that the strategic stocktake places pressure on the Department to find money to do that. In other words, we do not have the money to get rid of staff and we do not have the money to keep them. That is a ridiculous situation and is grossly unfair on the people involved.

No Member has yet mentioned the Department for Social Development. However, it is clear from the figures that the Assembly will not be able to put in place the type of capital expenditure plans that it had hoped. We must be honest about this issue. Perhaps it is time to work together as a collective team — the Assembly and the Executive — and work out which elements we can afford and which we cannot afford. It is just not sufficient simply to put our heads in the sand and say that we think that everything will be OK.

In the past, Mr Hamilton and others argued about the difficulties of the process, and that perhaps each Department must be left to try to find its own efficiencies, and that, collectively, we might be OK.

1.30 pm

When one considers the numbers, however, I am not sure that that could be done, given the challenges that face us and the likelihood that the situation will get worse. More to the point, I call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to clearly and concisely explain — in language that everybody understands — whether we have a problem. Are there issues on which we could work together to try to resolve the pressures? Are there decisions that although not being terribly palatable, must be made by somebody? I believe that that is what the people of Northern Ireland seek from us. They want genuine leadership; they do not want to hear fudge, fuddle and a belief that everything will be all

right on the night. We should work together to defend the core services on which people very much depend.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan):

When Basil McCrea expressed a particular interest in what Gershwin said, it led me to wonder whether we were witnessing a ‘Rhapsody in Tory Blue’ today as part of the new UUP position. *[Laughter.]*

Obviously, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have a view on the question of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Supply resolution. However, the Committee considered budgetary matters on a number of occasions, including monitoring rounds, and several issues that arose should be reflected in today’s debate.

In the context of the global downturn — which was not predicted or anticipated when the Budget was set — perhaps there should be some re-factoring of expenditure in relation to economic support. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Our Committee recognises that that does not just mean re-factoring some of the priorities in the budget of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but in the Budget more widely. The Committee recognises that matters of economic development extend to other Departments, such as the Department for Regional Development, which deals with key infrastructure; the Department for Social Development, which deals with housing issues; and — very importantly — the Department for Employment and Learning, which deals with the skills agenda and the challenges that we face as a region.

When making a number of my points, I will not pretend to confine them purely to DETI. I hope to reflect the spirit of comments that were made by members of the Committee. In relation to the current economic situation, there seems to be less of a demand on the budgets of DETI and Invest Northern Ireland in relation to foreign direct investment. That has given rise to questions about whether that money could be better used in other ways, either in the Department or more widely — by making economic interventions.

A number of issues that were identified by Committee members involved last year’s decision to withdraw the — albeit small — grants for business start-up. In the current circumstances, people will question whether that is a tenable decision and whether we should review it. In many ways, we should revamp the whole notion of financial support for people who start up businesses. Perhaps we should revisit whether a new menu of grants and support should be available to businesses that are trying to sustain themselves

through the current difficulties and that have the potential to grow beyond them.

In particular, we should consider whether support should be available to companies that have demonstrated that they can grow in current circumstances. In some cases, those companies are suffering from tax being demanded on the one hand, and credit being denied on the other. There is no means of supporting those companies when the grants are gone. In the current circumstances, we must consider whether we could make available a menu of grants to allocate money that will not be used for other economic-development purposes during the downturn.

Similarly, issues have been raised regarding Invest Northern Ireland and its performance. Many people have asked fundamental questions about whether the project that was to be achieved through the merger of LEDU, the IDB and the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) has lived up to its promise. We were told that it would operate at arm’s length, outside the Civil Service culture, and that it would be much more market facing and market orientated. However, few people seem to have that perception or experience of Invest Northern Ireland as it currently operates. In the current circumstances, those questions are being asked more sharply.

Of course, the Minister has established a review. Initially, its terms of reference appeared to be centred on Invest Northern Ireland and some related matters. However, those terms of reference have sensibly been widened to consider not just the performance and structure of Invest NI’s engagement with DETI, but how well it meshes with other key Departments and agencies in order to support economic development. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment looks forward to the developing work of that review, and it has already had some engagement with Professor Barnett and other members of the review team. That engagement will continue, and the Committee will support the Minister in encouraging the review to be radical, far-reaching and timely in delivering by the summer.

The Committee hopes that the review can offer longer-term recommendations for the shape of economic-development policy, including a strong, active and responsive support system for enterprise and business, as well as ensuring that the Assembly’s actions do not get in the way of business. It is important that devolution provides the business community with the sense that public policy and the Government are at their backs, rather than on their backs, and that is why we must review the regulatory framework, which can create burdens.

In addition, the Committee hopes that the review will produce some short-term recommendations,

particularly in response to some of the suggestions offered by its members.

With respect to some of the wider issues that have been mentioned, Ian Paisley Jnr pointed out the importance of investment in infrastructure generally, and he emphasised the high level of investment to which the current investment strategy is committed. Of course, I and the SDLP welcome that commitment. As someone who attempted to put in place a platform for an investment strategy, and having emphasised the need for significant investment in capital programmes and the need for a central driver with which to do so, I welcome the commitment, and the conversion of other parties, to that concept. Initially, those parties railed against it.

Nevertheless, our capital-expenditure programme still suffers from delivery sclerosis. Some Departments have delayed investment plans, and when investment plans have been produced, their target audiences have been unclear, they have been incompatible and they have lacked a coherent approach.

Furthermore, there is a question about whether the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has the capacity to drive and marshal capital-expenditure performance throughout Departments. In addition, there is an issue with underperformance and under capacity in Departments, so, rather than pumping up Departments to do that, we must consider ways in which the Strategic Investment Board can be restyled and reshaped in order to carry out the necessary tasks for the Departments — not behind their backs or in opposition to them, but in order to deliver the investment strategy that has been set out. If the Executive and the Assembly have been happy to endorse the broad priorities and the key projects of the investment strategy, they should have no problem with delegating the strategic management of that programme to the relevant public body, rather than attempting to carve up bits of it for Departments that are underperforming and failing to deliver.

In the current economic circumstances, we make no apologies for stressing the fact that capital investment in social housing is a key economic primer. We are not saying that that should be at the expense of other capital investments, but we are saying that it would provide a ready multiplier; getting the work on social housing going will get wages flowing throughout the region. Moreover, social-housing projects can be delivered much quicker than other projects. If it is there as an early win or as an easy, ready fruit for us to pick during this difficult season, we should avail ourselves of it.

Some Members have asked how the Budget will be changed if it is re-prioritised or revised. I remind those Members — particularly those in the DUP — that, recently, they have tabled a number of motions that

call for changes in the Budget. Last week, Iris Robinson, in her capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, tabled a motion that stated that some parts of the Health Service should be ring-fenced from the efficiency savings. That motion called for a change in the Budget, because it imposed efficiency savings across the Department.

The DUP has also tabled a motion on home closures, which will be debated soon. It follows the same theme; it is asking for a change in the Budget. Previously, Sammy Wilson called for the Minister of Education to change the Budget when she did not have the power to do so. Sinn Féin is also calling for changes to be made to the Budget in relation to ambulances.

Therefore, Members should not ask questions of the SDLP that they are not prepared to answer themselves.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Recently, the re-prioritisation of the Budget, the Budget allocations and the Programme for Government have been a source of debate inside and outside the Chamber. There are many outstanding concerns about whether the priorities have changed. Some of those concerns are genuine, but it must be understood that there will be no programmes or services delivered unless Members support the two motions that are before the House. Members must keep that in mind when they are making their contributions.

The fact that we have to work within the inadequate block grant that we receive from London is one of the main barriers to bringing forward anything, particularly in the current economic climate. Furthermore, our lack of fiscal and tax-varying powers means that we are working within certain parameters that confine us and prevent us from developing the innovative measures that are required to offset some of the issues relating to the financial difficulties that we are in.

The economic downturn presents the Executive with a number of difficulties — in particular, the need to offset any further job losses, to secure the jobs that exist and to create new jobs, as other Members and I have mentioned already. Most people will agree that unemployment and poverty — and the fear of poverty because of unemployment — are the real concerns facing people and their families.

It is important that we maintain our skilled workforce, and we must look beyond the current economic downturn. We need to work together to consider how we can maintain those employment levels. Mention has been made of the way in which Invest NI looks at foreign direct investment. However, we must build our local businesses and ensure that they are kept open and that people's jobs are secure.

At a time of economic downturn, it is important that a Budget considers the people who need support. On 26 and 27 January 2009, the Assembly debated the

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Financial Assistance Bill. There were delays, but it must be remembered that many people need the £150 to which they were entitled to pay for their fuel. It is important to remember such situations when issues are being debated, because we must be seen to provide leadership; that is what people want us to do.

There is an issue about the availability of finance and credit, and the access to working capital, particularly for businesses here. As many Members have said, it is imperative that banks and other lending institutions are challenged about their current lending. That challenge must come from the British Government and from local Ministers. Businesses and consumers have not yet felt the benefit of the injection of public money that was intended to steady the banks.

A lot of banks are now under public ownership, and many others are being supported with millions of pounds of public money; therefore, they have a responsibility to ensure that the money that they are receiving is going directly into the local economy. We all know from people who have contacted us that, currently, the biggest problem for businesses is securing working capital and cash flow.

1.45 pm

We need to work within our parameters. The fact is that there is no new money; therefore, it is important that we find innovative ways of spending the money that we have. The answer is good housekeeping and finding initiatives that will help us to spend the money that we have in the best way possible.

Recent initiatives that reduce the risk for banks — such as the enterprise finance guarantee scheme and the small firms finance scheme — need to be taken-up and rolled-out by the banks here. A lot of those schemes are not having an effect on the ground, and we must ensure that they come into place and are running smoothly.

As has been mentioned, Departments have a responsibility to ensure that underspend is kept to a minimum and that their capital and revenue projects are taken forward. Departments can, sometimes, be slow in doing that. I know that planning is a big issue for some of the large capital projects, particularly those funded by private investment. We must consider how planning is holding-up that process.

Improving the delivery of public procurement by providing good services and works can help the economy and local businesses and can also secure jobs for people, which is an important issue. By ensuring that social clauses are embedded into all public procurement contracts, we can help to tackle poverty and need by sustaining current employment and by creating new employment opportunities for people who may be wondering whether they are going to have the money to meet the requirements of everyday living.

Therefore, public procurement is very important, particularly in relation to small- and medium-sized businesses and social-economy enterprises. As recently as last Friday, we heard a report about the increase in house repossessions. Nothing has a greater impact on a family than having a house repossessed. Therefore, we must bring forward initiatives such as adequate mortgage-rescue plans. Earlier, it was suggested that Members may be a wee bit concerned about mentioning social housing, but I am going to mention it because it is very clear that a need for social housing still exists. There is also a need for people who want to buy their own homes to be able to secure the finance for a new mortgage.

It is important that we think outside the box and roll out initiatives that can operate within the existing constraints. Unless we do so, it will simply be a case of same old, same old. Increasing the funding in areas such as co-ownership schemes can encourage first-time buyers to take the risk of buying. At the moment, people are afraid of taking risks and they cannot be blamed for that. We need to drive forward the social housing programme and deliver the investment strategy, and the way that we can do that is by ensuring that Departments are bringing forward their planned capital projects.

The construction industry would be helped by such projects being undertaken; we must remember that approximately three quarters of the people who are becoming unemployed are from that industry. Therefore, that would provide an overall level of help. We must regard the current economic climate as a challenge to achieve the best possible outcomes in the here and now.

We must also look beyond the current economic downturn. The Programme for Government is good, but we must ensure that it is delivered in the way that people are expecting. That is, it must provide for the delivery of high-quality public services, the development of the economy, the building of prosperity and the redressing of the inequalities and disadvantage that still afflict substantial portions of our society.

It is important to remember that people were in poverty even before the economic downturn. We must ensure the best use and allocation of resources in the short term and the long term towards that end.

It is good to have a debate, and it is good that we are able to come to a place such as this and have our say. In the current climate, the best way forward is a united response from all the political parties in the Assembly and the Executive. We must get away from narrow politicking and debates and focus on real issues, which may be a matter of life and death for some people. We are where we are; we may not like it, but we must push forward together in a united way, and send people a clear message of leadership.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): I wish to comment on behalf of the Committee in respect of the Supply resolution for the 2008-09 spring Supplementary Estimates. The Committee scrutinised carefully the Department for Social Development's submissions for each of the monitoring rounds. Reviewing the Department's plans in these challenging economic conditions has been illuminating, and something of an education for Committee members. The Committee has asked many questions and where the Department has answered satisfactorily, I thank it for that. However, there are a few issues on which the Department has yet to provide complete answers. Budget scrutiny, in these difficult times, tends to be a work in progress.

In the monitoring round submissions, the Department has identified serious challenges to its budgetary planning, not least in respect of the social housing development programme. That programme has to deliver 1,500 new social housing starts in 2008-09, and it appears likely that that may not be achieved. It also appears that Housing Executive home improvements and maintenance programmes may miss their annual targets.

Behind those problems, and overshadowing the financing of social and affordable housing for years to come, is the collapse in house and land values. I do not know whether the Department could have anticipated the extent of the collapse in land and property receipts. However, I know that it warned consistently of the pressures on its budget throughout the financial year, and the Finance Minister is aware of that.

The Committee has considered at length the mitigating actions that the Department has adopted. It makes little difference whether they are called surrenders or reallocations — the upshot is the same. The budget for the Social Security Agency is around £80 million less in 2008-09. That reduction is mostly in capital areas, but includes some resource. Around £50 million was reallocated from the social security jobs and benefits offices capital programme to rescue the housing programmes, and £30 million went back to the centre.

It is a measure of the depth of the housing crisis that that reallocation — or whatever one wants to call it — appears to have been insufficient on its own to keep the social development housing programme on track for this year. Indeed, the Department has already asked for additional headroom of £30 million in order to bring the new housing starts programme in on target. The Department has also asked that £10.5 million be reallocated from urban regeneration programmes to support the Housing Executive housing maintenance and improvement programmes.

Finally, the Department has asked for approximately £8 million extra for anti-fuel-poverty payments. The Committee supports the proposed reallocation, the

request for headroom and the bid for the anti-fuel-poverty payment. However, the Committee has several concerns. First, that the social housing development programme be supported and achieve its targets for this year. The Committee believes that if that programme is sidetracked, or even temporarily derailed now, it will be very hard to restart and reach its final destination of 10,000 new social and affordable homes by 2013.

The Committee's second concern relates to the programmes from which money has been transferred. In particular, I refer to the jobs and benefits office capital works and other social-security resource requirements. Jobs and benefits offices have never been busier than they have in recent times. The decision to use the capital and resources from social security to support housing may have appeared to have been a good decision earlier this year. However, the economic situation has thrown up more challenges than expected. Some Committee members are concerned that there may be adverse implications for the provision of essential social-security services just when the need is greatest. As the Deputy Chairperson of my Committee said during the debate on the strategic stocktake on 27 January 2009, the problems facing the housing budget are significant, and not only for this year.

It could also be argued that the Department appears to have stored up more trouble for itself for next year, in the shape of the significant deficit in the social-security capital-project fund, which I mentioned earlier. That issue has arisen at a time when there will surely be an awful lot of demand for social-security services over the coming months, if not years. That is a difficult budgetary situation. The Committee will continue to scrutinise the Department for Social Development's spending plans. As I said, it is a work in progress. Committee members will continue to challenge the Department's decisions. We will look for method in its reasoning and prudence in its choices.

I thank the Department for its improving responses to the Committee's queries, and I also ask that the Minister of Finance and Personnel note the Committee's concerns, as set out today.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It was interesting to listen to Stephen Farry talk about fiscal stimulation. I am not sure how that is possible when one does not have fiscal control. However, that may be a matter for another day.

The Executive and the Assembly are confronted by many political and financial realities, and all Executive policies must have at their core fairness, inclusion and equality. We are faced with the economic and political realities that prevail, and we must recognise that. Unfortunately, because of the inadequate block grant from the British Government, we must continue to try to deal with limited resources while having increasing

needs. As my colleague Jennifer McCann said earlier, there must be a united response from all the political parties to the economic realities that we face.

It is incumbent on us to deliver for the most disadvantaged in our society. The Executive and the Assembly must ensure that regional inequalities are eradicated. The decentralisation of public-sector jobs is essential if disparities and imbalances are to be redressed and if balanced regional development is to be supported. The Bain Report on the relocation of public-sector jobs supports that decentralisation, yet the Social Security Agency's strategic business review, which is under way, appears to ignore that report. That issue must be confronted and addressed urgently.

Neighbourhood renewal, if properly resourced, is an effective way in which to target social need and help the most disadvantaged communities. The Department for Social Development is intent on transferring neighbourhood renewal to local government. If that happens, proper infrastructures must be put in place so that the transition can be seamless.

An interdepartmental approach to implementing a sustainable and effective anti-poverty strategy must be taken, and there must be a continuation of the pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020. It must be recognised that the current economic downturn will have a much more serious impact on those who are already in dire need, and the alleviation of their problems must be a priority so that when recovery comes, they can enjoy the benefits that come with it. There must be a continuing commitment to support a social economy and sustainable community development. The provision of social housing must continue to be a priority. Action can and should be taken, even within current financial constraints, to provide social housing.

The Minister for Social Development needs to stop blaming the Executive and get on with the job with which she has been tasked. All Departments want more money, but if it is not forthcoming, they have to get on with it and make the most of their resources.

2.00 pm

The regulation of private landlords must be a priority and will go some way in alleviating financial hardship for those people who rely on that sector for their housing needs.

Equality for people with disabilities must be delivered and their rights must be protected. Those people have the right to education, employment, housing, healthcare and adequate transport. The role of carers needs to be recognised, and they should be properly recompensed for their vital role.

Proper financial support for the community and voluntary sector must be implemented, and their skills and expertise should be fully recognised. In the long

term, that will provide some money for Departments that are involved in the delivery of similar services. Social justice needs to be the key phrase, and its provision to everyone in our society will show that the Assembly can be effective and make a difference to people's lives. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel explained, although there are two motions before the House on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, there is a single debate.

The spring Supplementary Estimates reflect the cumulative changes from earlier monitoring rounds, in which Departments either bid for additional resources because of new pressures or release any excess funds when it was clear that they will not be used. However, the Health Department is in a unique position, because it was given first call on available in-year moneys of up to £20 million under the comprehensive spending review. Therefore, it has not taken part in the monitoring rounds to date. The Department has received £15 million and expects the remaining £5 million from this exercise. The full £20 million has been factored into the Department's spending plans for the year.

As other Departments have been through the various monitoring rounds in the year, their respective Committees have, perhaps, had more of an opportunity to examine their financial pressures and easements. The slowdown in the growth of public-sector funding in recent years, which led into the last Budget negotiations, has meant that all Departments have to manage with less funding and are all feeling the pressure. The current financial crisis has added to that pressure. As Members are only too well aware, all Departments are required to achieve significant efficiency savings to make ends meet.

Spending on health accounts for by far the largest portion of public funding — around half of the total public expenditure or £4 billion from the £8 billion total. However, it is worth remembering that although all Departments are required to make the same percentage level of efficiency savings — 3% per year — that is a significant sum for the Health Department and has the potential to make a considerable impact on the level of health and social care services provided through the community.

Over the past number of months, the Committee has taken a keen interest in examining and challenging the efficiency delivery plans throughout the Health Service. The Committee heard first from the Minister and then from the main trade unions. Over the past few weeks, the Committee has been hearing from individual trusts about their detailed proposals, which is an

exercise that will be completed in a couple of weeks. The Committee also tabled a motion that was debated in the House last week, which called on the Minister to ensure that implementation of efficiency savings will not result in cuts to vital front line services. The motion, which also highlighted the need to protect the most vulnerable in our community — children, people with mental-health problems and older people — was, thankfully, carried.

Members will agree that making efficiency savings is a demanding and challenging exercise for all involved and it takes place in a particularly difficult financial climate. Any reductions or cutbacks in services are likely to add to the difficulties that our communities already face. The Health Committee will continue to monitor that issue over the coming months.

I will now change my hat from that of the Chairperson of the Health Committee to that of the DUP's spokesperson on health. For the record, I regret the attitude of my Ulster Unionist colleagues. If they do not support the motion, they will prevent moneys from going to Departments after 31 March. It is a pathetic and childish attempt to undermine the work of the Executive, bearing in mind that the Ulster Unionists are represented on that Executive. It is one thing to disagree, but all concerns and issues are raised and dealt with in the Executive. This is a mandatory coalition. It is perhaps not the most perfect set-up, but, until we have a voluntary coalition, all four parties are tied to the decisions that are made and signed off.

Mr McGimpsey boasted that he could gain additional funding after the draft Budget was signed off by all four parties, and it was open for Departments to put in bids for additional moneys. Indeed, he has been heard all over the airwaves boasting about how he could draw down and extract more money from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Just over a week ago, Sir Reg Empey said on the radio that we did not even need a debate today because the issue has been agreed, and it has all been tied up. Therefore, I am wondering where the Member for Strangford David McNarry is coming from and what support he has from his party. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey, is saying one thing, yet one of the less prominent Members of the party is speaking out. I wonder whether it is sour grapes or whether the whole party will put its hands up and oppose the motion.

The country is in a dreadful situation — as is the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of the world — with the current economic downturn, yet for the sake of a headline, the Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to say that it does not support the Executive, even though it is part of that Executive. It will leave the electorate scratching their heads and wondering

what sort of representatives they have in the Ulster Unionist Party.

If the Budget does not go through, we will face meltdown because of the impact on Departments after 31 March. Departments will have no money. What are they going to tell the electorate? I cannot wait to hear the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey — *[Interruption.]*

I am speaking, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order.

A Member: Calm down.

Mrs I Robinson: They should calm down and perhaps take a pill.

Sir Reg Empey has one view, and I cannot wait to hear how he is going to explain to the voters and taxpayers of Northern Ireland — who are facing the credit crunch with great difficulty — that the Government have no money. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Speaker will be glad to hear that I am not going to try to explain that.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09 and the Vote on Account for 2009-2010.

The Minister for Regional Development wrote to the Committee last week setting out the main changes arising from the June, September and December monitoring rounds, and they are reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09.

The Minister also identified a number of areas where additional headroom was included in the Department for Regional Development's spring Supplementary Estimates. Those areas include £2.5 million for a possible allocation to Roads Service for structural maintenance in the February monitoring round; £900,000 to allow a possible transfer from DSD to Roads Service in respect of the neighbourhood renewal strategy in the February monitoring round; £38.5 million for Northern Ireland Water's accelerated programme facilities; £55 million for Northern Ireland Water's revolving credit facility; and £400 million for adjustments that may arise following the in-year reclassification by Her Majesty's Treasury of Northern Ireland Water.

The Committee for Regional Development scrutinised the quarterly monitoring rounds in 2008-09 and responded to the Department on the specific bids and easements contained in each monitoring round return. Arising from that work, the Committee identified several issues of strategic concern, which, in my capacity as Chairperson, I want to raise.

It is the responsibility of the Executive to resolve pressures on the DRD budget arising from the ongoing

deferral of charging for the provision of water and sewerage services. Although the Committee awaits a more detailed briefing from the Department on the consequences of Her Majesty's Treasury's in-year decision to reclassify Northern Ireland Water, I am pleased to see that headroom provision has been made to address that.

During monitoring rounds, and also on the Floor of the House during debates on the Budget and on the Programme for Government, the Committee raised the need to provide adequate and timely funding for structural maintenance. Funding for structural maintenance must be adequate, in that it approaches the funding levels that are set out in the independently audited structural maintenance fund plan. This year, funding reached less than 60% of the recommended level, and a slight improvement is due next year. In the in-year monitoring rounds of previous years, DRD was successful in attracting additional funding for structural maintenance and bringing spending on it closer to the levels that are recommended in the structural maintenance funding plan. However, that is not the case this year. I reiterate the Committee's view that light of current budgetary pressures, it is no longer acceptable or prudent for the Department to rely on in-year monitoring to fund structural maintenance programmes.

Spending on structural maintenance must also be timely. At the earliest possible point in the financial year, DRD has to ensure that the structural maintenance industry has the capacity to deliver. The Committee's arguments — based on road safety and the value-for-money benefits arising from a proper level of structural maintenance — are well rehearsed. In addition — and in the current economic climate — adequate and timely spending of structural maintenance will go some way to assisting the hard-pressed construction sector.

I wish to make some further points as an MLA. The majority of people who rely on front line services are socially and economically challenged. In these increasingly difficult times, they continue to rely on those services to provide for many of their basic needs. Pensioners, the working poor and near-benefit-level families will be hit hardest if we continue with the status quo.

I provide the following examples. All the authorities on housing agree that we need between 2,000 and 2,500 new social homes to be built each year in Northern Ireland to meet increasing demand. With the economic downturn and the job losses that will result, that figure will increase. It was disappointing that in the Programme for Government, we were promised only 1,500 new social and affordable homes each year; it is unacceptable that there will be a 40% cut in that figure, which will result in the building of only 800 to 900 social and affordable homes, which will increase homelessness. More families will have to turn to the

private sector where, in order to get a house, they will have to subsidise their housing benefit. That will result in more families living below the poverty line.

Continuation of the fiscal status quo will ensure that there are other negative impacts on housing. The Housing Executive does not have the available moneys to repair and maintain buildings. People are living in deteriorating accommodation: kitchen replacements have stopped; units for people with complex needs and those who require care in the community have been shelved; and external cyclical maintenance schemes have been suspended, which will have an unacceptable impact on older people and those with special needs and physical disabilities.

No one in the House can defend that position. We are failing some of the most vulnerable people in society. The Minister for Social Development has been hamstrung by the DFP decision, and people will continue to suffer because of it. We are told that, each year, 1,000 people die of cold-related illnesses, and vulnerable people are now marginalised simply because the Executive —

2.15 pm

Mr F McCann: I do not disagree with what the Member has said — most Members would argue that there needs to be an effective social house-building programme. Does the Member agree that over the past two years, the majority of the social housing programme has been made up of houses bought on the open market, or apartments bought off the shelf? That does nothing for family housing.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Mr McCann makes a fair point. I am not really concerned whether houses are bought or built; I am concerned that there are sufficient homes provided by the state for people who need them.

The Programme for Government made a commitment to reduce child poverty by half by 2012, and to eradicate it by 2030. I think that everyone would agree that those figures are laughable. The number of children living in severe poverty is increasing and under the current circumstances, will continue to increase for the foreseeable future. OFMDFM's reaction to that has been deplorable, and the priorities of the Minister of Finance and Personnel do very little to relieve the plight of those people.

The recent Financial Assistance Bill promised £150 for pensioners who receive pension credit to help with heating through the winter, and that was pushed through the House using the accelerated passage procedure. We were told that that had to be done so that the money could be paid out in time for Christmas. Committees were not allowed to hold the Department to account.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Go ahead, Milton.

Mr Hamilton: I note the reference to Milton Friedman; at this point in the day, I would take any lunch, never mind a free lunch.

Can the Member tell me how the Financial Assistance Bill — which provided for a payment of £150 to people on pension credit or income support — could be rushed through before Christmas, when the legislation came before the House after Christmas? His friend the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister can clarify that for him.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: The Member should talk to his colleague junior Minister Donaldson.

If we do not hurry up and pay out, pensioners will be using the money for their summer holidays instead of their winter fuel bills. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Water payments are now inevitable due to the Government's placing of Northern Ireland Water back under DRD's control. That will result in capital asset payments in 2011. Make no mistake, if water charges are introduced, everyone will have to make a contribution in the form of a payment for water, even those people who have never before had to do so. People living on benefits did not have to pay for water or for rates; however, if water charges are introduced this year, that link will be broken — every individual will have to pay a charge for water. If water charges are introduced, pensioners who receive pension credit, which the Government say is a safety net, will have to pay water charges. The Executive are saying that they know better.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: There was an intervention, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There is no extra time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I speak as the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I speak for a community of which I am very proud. As always, the Committee has been relentless in its robust scrutiny of departmental accounts, and we endeavour to ensure that budgets are met in a prudent manner in accordance with the departmental aims and objectives within the strategic plan.

This year has been difficult for the agriculture sector, and the farming community has found itself

under mounting pressure to ensure that it is compliant with the European nitrates directives. Previously, I have presented to the House the Committee's thoughts on the severe accounting failure of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in respect of that matter, and the severe impact that that has had on the Northern Ireland economy. I will not repeat those comments today.

However, the Committee has been supportive of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel in their attempts to ensure that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's original underestimate of the cost of the scheme has been rectified. The Committee notes the previous increases of the budget and the additional £29 million that is noted in the Estimates. I thank the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for that additional finance, which is a fulfilment of the promise that was made by the previous Minister, who assured the Committee that that finance would be provided.

The Committee welcomes that additional money and calls on the Department to ensure that it takes all necessary action to get the money out to farmers as quickly as possible. A past failure has been that although the money has been made available, the Department was slow in getting it into the pockets of the farmers who faced the expenditure.

The Committee recently received a presentation from the Department on the February monitoring round and was surprised that the Department had not identified any reduced requirement in respect of its budget. The figures that the Department presented showed that it still had some £90 million of its budget to spend from December 2008 to March 2009. The Committee is concerned at that, given the Department's track record in surrendering moneys too late in the day for other areas of the economy to make use of those moneys. That is evident in the last provisional out-turn, when a total of £31 million was returned by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Committee will continue to monitor that closely and ensure that the Department does not break the assurances that it has provided to us and to the industry. The industry cannot afford for moneys that are desperately needed for investment being returned because of the inefficiency of departmental accountancy processes. The Committee genuinely hopes that the Department achieves its budgetary targets and that its historical habit of returning significant sums of public money out of the industry and the Northern Ireland economy has ceased.

The Committee notes the additional sum of £12.5 million for the cull-and-disposal scheme, the hardship payments and animal disease compensation. However, the Committee believes that the Department has lost

the opportunity to address the difficulties in each of those areas appropriately.

The Department's counterpart in the Irish Republic acted immediately to the dioxin scare by going to Europe to seek a substantial hardship compensation package amounting to £180 million. Although the additional £12.5 million is welcome, it does not address the full cost of the scare to the industry, and we must continue to pursue fervently whatever avenue is open to us. That includes that of the Irish Republic, where the problem originated and which has a duty to pay for the disaster that came out of the dioxin scare and that which followed from it.

The Committee calls for a compensation package for those who were severely impacted by the severe flooding of August 2008. The Department's response was to put a business case to DFP that stated that there was no economic case for compensating farmers who are now struggling to support their families and their businesses. That was a despicable statement; instead of providing appropriate compensation, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development suggested in its business case that it would be preferable to allow those farms to go out of business since larger, stronger businesses would take over the land.

The Department then plucked a figure of £500,000 and presented that to the Executive as being sufficient to cover costs that it considered to be in excess of £1 million. That has resulted in farmers with losses approaching £50,000 receiving less than £7,000 as a hardship payment. I am sad to say that it was not the Executive that were to blame for that, but the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The £7,000 is undoubtedly welcome, but it falls far short of what is needed to support the sector.

In respect of animal disease compensation, at every monitoring round, the Committee is presented with the spectacle of the Department taking its begging bowl to DFP in search of more money. Disease compensation for bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis costs the Northern Ireland economy more than £60 million a year, but what does that achieve? Departmental figures indicate that the brucellosis level remains static and that the incidence of TB is increasing. That is happening despite the Department's defined disease-reduction target in the Programme for Government.

The Committee recently considered the Diseases of Animals Bill, and it will recommend to the House that the Committee undertakes an inquiry into how to compel the Department to implement a TB-eradication programme. In years to come, such a programme will allow for the positive release of moneys back into the Northern Ireland economy, instead of pouring them down the drain in compensation for diseases that should, and could, be eradicated.

We cannot continue to allow public finances to be wasted. We must take action beyond spending money foolishly on studies into subjects about which we already know the answer, such as the £6 million that the Department will spend on studying — rather than tackling — the prevalence of TB in badgers. The farming community is not only alarmed, it is disgusted by the inaction. The Department must use money proactively to protect the industry and the public, and to enhance the Northern Ireland agriculture sector and the wider economy.

I stated that the Department does not have a good record in managing its budget. However, at this stage, the Committee gives it the benefit of the doubt. The Committee notes and welcomes additional bids made in respect of matters that are key to the industry, and calls on the Department to keep its side of the deal by ensuring that those moneys are fully spent on supporting the vital agriculture industry.

I will speak personally for the final minute of my speech. We are living in challenging times. Issues relating to pensioners, people with special needs or learning disabilities, and children who live in poverty must be tackled. As a public representative, I find it appalling that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is recommending the closure of acute services at hospitals in Whiteabbey and in Mid Ulster; the closure of old people's homes; and the closure of special homes, such as the one at Cherry Lodge in Randalstown, with the loss of vital services for the most deprived children.

We must be very careful. I want those in the House who object to the Budget to answer a simple question. As members of the Conservative Party, and in the midst of the difficulties that we face, where would they make cuts? The cuts in services across the water that the Conservative Party is recommending would have a major effect on the Northern Ireland Budget and on the spending that is available to keep our residential homes and hospitals open, and to maintain our services to the community.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Patsy McGlone.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Autism Northern Ireland

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education what meetings she has had with Autism Northern Ireland in the last year. (AQO 2046/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Cuirim béim láidir ar ghné na riachtanas speisialta oideachais go ginearálta, an t-uathachas san áireamh. Tá tábhacht ar leith leis an athbhreithniú atá á dhéanamh faoi láthair ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais agus cuimsiú agus muid ag iarraidh feabhsuithe a chur ar chreat reatha riachtanas speisialta oideachais.

Special educational needs, including autism, are a particular priority for me. The ongoing review of special educational needs and inclusion is of great importance as my Department strives to improve the current special educational needs and inclusion framework.

As Members will be aware, my Department organised a North/South conference on autism, which was held in Croke Park. It brought together specialists, experts, professionals and parents from throughout the island of Ireland. A follow-up conference will take place.

On 16 May 2008, I met members of the south Down branch of Autism NI in Newry for a wide-ranging discussion on matters that relate to provision for autistic children and services that are provided by the Middletown Centre for Autism. We had a very productive meeting, and I was able to direct parents who were in attendance to the relevant education and library boards.

On 5 February 2009, I had a useful meeting with Eileen Bell and Arlene Cassidy of Autism NI, who were able to provide me with an update of their work with families and autism professionals and their plans for an international autism conference.

In addition to those two meetings, Autism NI met Department of Education officials on 3 December 2008, when it provided a comprehensive outline of service developments in the organisation.

I am also glad to report that Autism NI has been working actively in several ways with the Middletown

Centre for Autism. The centre provided Autism NI with places on its 2007-08 training programme and provided staff to assist Autism NI in the delivery of training. The Middletown Centre is currently in discussion with Autism NI in order to conclude a service-level agreement to facilitate the transfer of the five-day Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children training model to Middletown.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell the House whether she has any plans to introduce a joined-up strategy on autism with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

The Minister of Education: My Department works closely with the Department of Health because it is important that they work together at every level. We will continue to do so. I thank the Member for his question. If a real difference is to be made in the area of special educational needs and inclusion, it is essential that the Department of Health and the Department of Education work together.

Mr McCallister: Further to Mr McQuillan's question, does the Minister agree that she must broaden the entire system and process of her response to autism? As a Health Committee member, I have visited Wales to examine its response, which is much broader and involves health, education, and employment and learning. Does she agree that her approach must be much broader and get as many people on board as possible in order to achieve the best response, which autistic people need and deserve?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his comment. I welcome people's recognition of the importance of cross-cutting relationships. The broadest possible approach must be taken towards autism and special educational needs. As Members will be aware, I have presented a review of special educational needs and inclusion to the Executive. I look forward to their discussion on the matter.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an cheist a fhreagairt. Does the Minister believe that autism services are best delivered on a cross-departmental basis with maximum co-ordination between Departments and, indeed, that autism legislation is the best way to achieve and ensure that level of co-operation?

The Minister of Education: Thug mé freagra ar an chéad pháirt den cheist. I believe that Departments must work together, which is why my Department works closely with the Department of Health. I look forward to the continuation of that work.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is a wonderful centre of excellence. In addition to our cross-party work in the North, we are working with our counterparts in the South of Ireland. I note that the autism centre there is funded by the Department of Education and

Science and the Department of Health and Children. To date, the autism centre in the North has been funded only by the Department of Education. It is very important that all the Departments work together. We can build an international centre for excellence here.

The number of children with autistic spectrum disorder has increased in recent years, and there are many other children with special educational needs who daily face significant life challenges. A comprehensive legislative framework on special education provision already exists. The review of special educational needs and inclusion aims to improve provision and access to services for all children who have special educational needs. The introduction of new legislation is a lengthy process. Many proposals for improving services, specifically for children with autism, could be progressed more quickly through the existing legislative framework.

English as an Alternative Language

2. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of Education what are the reporting requirements for resources allocated to schools under the English as an Alternative Language scheme; and how the benefits of this scheme to each pupil are assessed. (AQO 2047/09)

The Minister of Education: Léiríodh ar dhaonáireamh Dheireadh Fómhair 2007 go raibh 5,665 dalta ó thíortha eile ina gcónaí i dTuaisceart na hÉireann a raibh Béarla mar theanga bhreise acu.

The October 2007 census indicated that there were 5,665 newcomer pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL) in the North of Ireland. My Department provides funding directly to schools to allow them to support their newcomer pupils. In addition, funding is provided to education and library boards for the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS).

The common funding formula is used to allocate funding directly to schools. Schools receive an additional 50% of the basic age-weighted pupil-unit cash value — £983.08 in 2008-09 — for each full-time newcomer pupil that is designated in the school census as having English as an additional language. During 2008-09, a total of £5.5million was allocated to schools via the common funding formula. Members will be aware that there are some children for whom we do not have exact numbers and that I recently decided to include the Roma children in this programme.

Under local management of schools arrangements, it is for the principal and board of governors of each school to determine how to spend their budgets and plan their use of resources to maximum effect. However, the support provided by the Inclusion and Diversity Service is also relevant. That regional service was established on 1 April 2007, and it is operated by the five education and library boards. It uses the

Department's funding to support schools with newcomer pupils who have English as an additional language.

The service received £1,015,000 in 2008-09. That allowed the IDS to establish a number of EAL support services, including diversity coordinators, a multi-lingual website, interpreting and translation services and a toolkit for primary-school teachers in Ireland, which I jointly launched with the relevant Minister in the South of Ireland. There is a lot of work being done, and the issue will be included in our review of special needs and inclusion services.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for her response. She said that more than £5.5 million has been allocated for 5,665 pupils under the EAL scheme. Given that that money is allocated under the common funding formula, how can we be sure that those pupils are benefiting directly from the additional resources? How is their performance and achievement measured? What assurance will the Minister give that she will review and amend the common funding formula and introduce reporting requirements for the scheme?

The Minister of Education: I welcome those very important questions. We must target our resources on the basis of objective need. To do that, we need the most up-to-date assessment, investigation and data for newcomer children, and that is why we have brought forward the review of special educational needs and inclusion. I look forward to an Executive discussion on that. I have it ready for tabling, but I have not yet been given a date on which it will be discussed by the Executive. It is very important that that discussion takes place, because it concerns £25 million of extra money that we fought for and achieved in the Budget. There is a possibility of losing that £25 million if the proposal does not progress at the earliest opportunity. It is important to target on the basis of need.

The Department is conducting a comprehensive review of the common funding formula in order to ensure that money is targeted on the basis of need and is allocated to the most disadvantaged children. The Member will have noted the Department's decision on the Roma children. That was changed because school principals brought the matter to the Department's attention.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline how resources that are allocated per pupil to teaching English as an alternative language compare to those allocated for teaching English to local students?

The Minister of Education: We must target on the basis of need and identify barriers to learning, which we must address at an early age rather than as children progress through school. Early intervention will increase all children's chances of achievement. It should not be a competition between children from ethnic minorities

and children from the North of Ireland. The review of special needs and inclusion will meet the needs of all children.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the newcomer policy propose support for early-years provision? Will funds be set aside for that?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, the Department is going to bring forward its important newcomer policy, and all our policies are, of course, interlinked. Special needs and the newcomer policy are interlinked, as is our review of the common funding formula. Therefore, the newcomer and early-years policies will go hand in hand. As I said earlier, the Department's various policies are like a jigsaw and are all interconnected.

Early-Years Strategy

3. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Education when she will publish the early-years strategy.
(AQO 2048/09)

The Minister of Education: The question, appropriately, refers to the early-years strategy that Carmel Hanna mentioned in her question.

Tá an Roinn ag súil le dréacht-straitéis a thabhairt os comhair an Choiste Oideachais go luath sa bhliain 2009, agus beidh comhairliúchán leathan cuimsitheach poiblí ina dhiaidh sin san earrach — beidh comhairliúchán leis na hearnálacha sláinte agus oideachais níos leithne agus le páistí agus tusimitheoirí — sula mbeidh an straitéis críochnaithe agus foilsithe.

The Department plans to bring the draft strategy to the Education Committee early in 2009. A broad and inclusive public consultation — including consultation with the health and education sectors, and children and parents — will follow in spring before the strategy is finalised and published.

Mrs O'Neill: I look forward to receiving that document in the Education Committee. Does the Minister recognise the importance of investing in early-years provision? Does she recognise that early intervention is critical to investing in a child's future and development?

The Minister of Education: The early years of a child's life are critical. During the early months and years, a high percentage of learning takes place. Children form attitudes, make first relationships, develop concepts and form the foundations for later skills and learning. As I said earlier, the strategy will recognise that early intervention encompasses a wide range of issues, and that means identifying and addressing specific needs in a timely manner. Those needs contribute to the individual's ability to grow and learn and to develop and fulfil his or her potential.

A hungry child will be unable to learn, and a child who has suffered violence at home will have additional barriers to overcome. Without early intervention, a child that does not speak English will experience much greater difficulty. Without appropriate early-years support, a child who is autistic, dyslexic or suffers from dyspraxia will struggle to be comfortable and stimulated in school. Therefore, it is essential to ensure proper early-years intervention for young people.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mervyn Storey, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Storey: In case there is confusion, I ask the question as a Member, not as Chairperson of the Committee. Sometimes, when the Education Minister brings forward proposals and policies, it seems as though the children will have left school by the time they are implemented, because we are still waiting on so many of them. Will the Minister comment on speculation that the strategy for children under six years of age will include comment on the ending of reception classes — given that the Minister tells us that early intervention is paramount to her?

The Minister of Education: I look forward to having discussions at the Executive on my review of special education needs and inclusion. I am very disappointed that, to date —

Mr Storey: Answer the question.

The Minister of Education: This is in relation to the first part of the Member's comment. I am very disappointed that, to date, my proposals have not been tabled, despite the fact that I sent them in July and gave responses in November. Despite that, the issue is still not on the Executive agenda. I hope that it will be placed on the Executive agenda very soon, because people who care about children with special needs do not block proposals from being placed on the agenda.

In relation to early-years education, I will not comment on the contents of a review that is under way, but I will say that I hope that, when the review of early-years provision is ready, it will be placed on the Executive's agenda very quickly.

Mr B McCrea: Given the almost universal acceptance in the House of the importance of early-years provision, perhaps the Minister can explain where it is placed on her list of priorities. How much time has she spent on that issue in comparison with the transfer issue, for example? Which factor does she think has the greater influence on a child's educational attainment?

The Minister of Education: The question shows a lack of understanding of the interconnectedness of all the policies — the review of early-years provision; the review of special needs and inclusion; the review of Irish-medium education; transfer 2010; and the

entitlement framework. None of those policies is more important than any other — all are equally important. Anyone who has listened to me in the House will know that I have always spoken about interconnectedness. If intervention is not made at an early stage, or if the education of our children is destroyed by ensuring that they spend their time cramming for tests that they should not be doing at that age, it will distort their early years, distort their literacy and numeracy, and distort the education system.

Post-Primary Transfer: Executive Committee Discussions

4. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister of Education how many times she has discussed the issue of post-primary transfer with the Executive Committee. (AQO 2049/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir mé páipéir ar aistriú iarbhunscoile faoi bhráid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin ar dhá ócáid ar leith ag iarraidh plé a dhéanamh ar an ábhar le teacht ar chomhaontú ar mo mholtaí chun creatlach reachtach d'aistriú 2010 a éascú.

I have brought papers on post-primary transfer to the Executive on two separate occasions, seeking a discussion with a view to obtaining agreement on my proposals to facilitate a legislative framework for transfer 2010. In May 2008, I brought proposals to a meeting of the Executive; the DUP and UUP refused to discuss them. I offered to hold a single-issue Executive meeting on the matter. Again, that was rejected by the DUP. I also wrote to every Executive Minister, offering them the opportunity to discuss my proposals on a one-to-one basis. No DUP Minister availed of that opportunity.

In January 2009, I produced a policy memorandum paper that provided further detail in relation to my proposals and signalled my intention to publish guidance if the Executive again failed in their duty to engage with me. The Executive again refused to discuss the proposals, and that resulted in the publication of guidance, including recommendations for admissions criteria, on which consultation is under way until 27 April 2009.

People on the Shankill Road can ask the DUP and UUP very valid questions, as can people in Kilcooley and in different parts of the North of Ireland, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. I will give three statistics on which everyone should ruminate.

Last year, 10 children from the Shankill Road gained access to a grammar school. No children from Kilcooley gained access to a grammar school. Sixteen children from the New Lodge gained access to a grammar school. There is no comparison between those figures and the statistics from some of the more

affluent suburbs. The DUP must, therefore, ask itself what it is doing to support children in working-class areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister clarify whether she intended to answer questions 4 and 7 together?

The Minister of Education: Yes, I did. I am sorry; I should have said that.

Mr Cobain: Perhaps the Minister will tell the House whether she tried to resolve the issue informally before bringing it to the Executive? If she did, will she tell us if she had any meetings with the DUP and, if so, what the outcomes of those meetings were?

The Minister of Education: As people will know, I have had many discussions with every single party and with the Committee for Education. I attempted to have discussions with the Executive, but some parties on the Executive refused me. I have met educationalists, all stakeholders, the Churches, the trade unions and the children's rights groups. I have left no stone unturned. I had many discussions at different levels with all the political parties.

Mr McFarland: Does the Minister not understand that the way in which she has handled this issue — by saying that she is engaging with all those concerned, but not really engaging in any serious way — has done more damage than if she had dealt with the matter in a sensible way and had engaged with people in order to have a proper debate?

The Minister of Education: I respectfully suggest that the Member considers how his party has engaged on the issue of post-primary transfer. His party has failed to engage; it has failed to take into account how the existing system discriminates against working-class children. I read out the statistics, which are an indictment of our society. We need a system that is fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. We need a system that does not test children at the tender age of 10 or 11 and on which future pathways are determined.

I am moving forward because parents and teachers want clarity, and I am providing clarity. I have issued guidance because both parties on the opposite Benches refuse to engage on the issue of post-primary transfer. We cannot allow the current levels of underachievement to continue. We cannot allow the system that is failing 12,000 people every single year to continue. I am not prepared to allow that to continue. We have educational apartheid, and it has to stop now. The best way to deal with that is for all schools to adhere to the guidance so that we have a smooth transition in transfer 2010.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer.

Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire a n-aontódh sí liom nach dul chun cinn ar bith é an córas neamhrialta

atá cruthaithe aici ar an seachóras a bhíodh ann. Go deimhin, chruthaigh sí córas roghnaitheach a thabharfaidh ar dhaltai dó nó b'fhéidir trí de theistíní a dhéanamh.

Will the Minister agree that the unregulated system that she has created is no improvement on the former system of transfer, and that, in fact, she has ensured the continuation of a selective system in which children will have to sit not one test, but possibly two or three? Will she further agree that children who are from a socially disadvantaged background will be further disadvantaged by such an unregulated system?

The Minister of Education: I thought that the SDLP was opposed to academic selection. The question that the Member asks obviously shows that they are not. That is very disappointing.

If all post-primary schools adhere to the guidance, no child will be required to enter any test. If schools depart from that guidance and offer breakaway entrance tests, no parent will be forced to enter their child for those. I have advised schools on the legal perils of doing that. We have an opportunity to build a new system that, for the first time, is based on equality and on giving every child an equal chance. That is what I will do. I hope that the parties that claim to oppose inequality and academic selection will join me in bringing about that change.

Mr Poots: Given that the Minister has failed in her efforts to introduce a bog-standard comprehensive system, will she, at least, allow the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to set the examination paper, or does she want to go down the route of privatising education services?

The Minister of Education: I find some of the words that the Member used derogatory. I hope that the Member can explain his comments to the many schools in the community that he claims to represent. Those schools, such as Ashfield Girls' High School and Cookstown High School, ensure that all children are welcome. The Member's use of offensive terminology — such as “bog-standard comprehensive” — really shows where he is coming from in this debate.

Non-Selective Education Systems

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the effectiveness of the performance of non-selective education systems in other countries. (AQO 2050/09)

The Minister of Education: D'amharc mo Roinn ar na torthaí oideachais a baineadh amach i dtíortha san Eagraíocht um Chomhar agus Fhorbairt Eacnamaíochta, agus bhreithnigh sí freisin feidhmíocht choibhneasta na dtíortha sin nach gcuirtear taifid acadúla daltaí san

áireamh go ginearálta maidir le hiontráil ar iarbhunscoileanna.

My Department has examined the educational outcomes achieved across countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and has also considered the relative performance of countries where students' academic records are not taken into account in admission to post-primary schools. The data shows that many countries where academic selection is not a factor are capable of outperforming the system here to a significant degree.

The outcomes from the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in, for example, reading, show that we have a score of 495, which represents average performance at Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) level.

Compare that with, for example, Sweden, where the OECD reports that only 2% of pupils attend schools where their academic record is a prerequisite or high priority for admittance, and yet its PISA reading score from 2006 stood at 507 — a performance significantly better than the OECD average score. Consider Finland, which has a score of 547 in reading and 548 in mathematics.

Other countries where the vast majority of young people are admitted to schools without recourse to academic selection include Scotland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark. Those countries all significantly outperform us in mathematics, and Canada, Australia and New Zealand also significantly outperform us in reading.

In Belgium, three quarters of young people transfer to post-primary education, untroubled by academic selection, and that country's performance also outshines our own — it is significantly above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science.

In the rest of Ireland, academic selection is not a feature of the education system, and yet, in the South, the performance in reading — a score of 517 compared to our 495 — is significantly better than ours and the OECD average. Let us learn — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: We must deal with our level of underachievement, not run away from it.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer, which clearly demonstrates how out of touch the education system in the North is. It also demonstrates how out of touch some of the Members on the Benches opposite are. *[Interruption.]*

A bit of peace, please. The Minister touched on the issue of PISA. Can she outline how that is relevant to international best practice and to our situation?

The Minister of Education: As Members may know, PISA is an assessment of the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in various countries across the world. It runs every three years and uses a series of tests based on real-life challenges that involve reading, maths and science.

3.00 pm

The tests have undergone rigorous scrutiny to ensure that they are robust. That allows us to have confidence when we compare the results of participating countries or regions. The first round of PISAs took place in 2000, and each round has seen the number of participating countries grow. That growth included an increase from 32 in 2000 to 57 in 2006, when 30 OECD member countries took part. We have taken part in each study since the PISA was established.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure that planning applications currently within the planning system, that offer employment opportunities, are dealt with expediently given the economic downturn.

(AQO 2066/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): The Programme for Government refers to a six-month target being applied to large-scale planning proposals in which pre-application discussions have taken place. Those proposals are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole — or a substantial part — of Northern Ireland.

Two strategic project teams have been created to specifically handle that type of application, including facilitating the pre-application discussions. Applications that do not fall into that category will still be given priority in the planning system in relation to their processing, and measures are in place to that effect.

Guidance on the prioritisation was issued to all divisional planning offices in July 2006. That clarified that priority should be given to applications on which grant aid may depend, or to certain commercial, industrial, social or infrastructure proposals that have clear strategic, employment, community or public-interest dimensions.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer. The Department of the Environment recently recruited 34 people for professional and technical reasons. Will those casual

workers receive full-time positions, or does the Minister envisage any redundancies?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member is quite right: we have gone through a process, and we are considering whether casual employees should become full-time employees. The Member will also be aware that there are certain resource implications for the Department in light of the economic downturn. Planning applications have decreased by about 40%. Currently, there is quite a deficit in the Planning Service as a result of reduced fee income. In light of that deficit, officials and I are studying the current method of delivering the Planning Service in Northern Ireland. It is obvious that the number of planning officers must be included in that consideration.

I assure the Member that my priority is to keep the service at a high standard while dealing with the backlog and making sure that we have the resources to quickly process planning applications. However, that means that we must consider the resource implications and how we could obtain additional resources to keep the current complement of planning officers in light of the straightened financial circumstances.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell us whether there has been a reduction in business-related planning applications since the start of the economic downturn?

The Minister of the Environment: If the Member had listened to the answer that I just provided, he would have heard me saying that there has been a reduction in planning applications of some 40%. Given the current economic position, that is understandable. I seek to make the best of that opportunity by ensuring that applications that are in the system are dealt with quickly.

Although we received 15,000 applications in the past year, I point out to the Member that we dealt with 18,000 applications. We have tried to use the current situation to ensure that we get rid of some of the backlog of applications in the planning system, although we still have to deal with some of those applications. There is a big backlog in relation to Planning Policy Statement 21 (PPS 21), and I have guaranteed that we will have dealt with that by June of this year.

There has been a reduction in the number of applications. That reduction has had implications for the Department and for the resources that are available to the Planning Service.

Mr Neeson: Does the Minister agree that the recent decision to decline planning permission for the Aurora building was a lost opportunity for job creation? Moreover, does he agree that that decision flies in the face of the planning permission that has already been granted for the Obel skyscraper, which is located beside one of Belfast's most historic buildings, namely, the Custom House?

The Minister of the Environment: I do not often find myself in agreement with my colleague from East Antrim; however, on this occasion, I do agree, and as one would expect, I have already made my feelings about the Aurora project public.

The Aurora project has massive potential to regenerate an area of Belfast that is in need of regeneration. I accept that it was to be built beside a listed building. However, as the Member pointed out, planning permission has been granted to build other large buildings beside significant listed buildings, such as the Custom House at the docks. The management board is examining that planning application, and those matters will be considered.

Belfast City Council: Town Planning Committee

2. **Rev Dr R Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment what approaches he has received from the Town Planning Committee of Belfast City Council since taking up office. (AQO 2067/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since taking up office, I have received no formal approaches from the town planning committee of Belfast City Council. I believe that it is isolating and ignoring me, and I feel lonesome.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he reflected on his previous commitment to resign from Belfast City Council, and does he not accept that being simultaneously the Minister in charge of planning and a member of a council planning committee is a conflict of interest, which is hugely damaging to his credibility and, more importantly, to the credibility and structures of Government?

The Minister of the Environment: The majority of Members are also members of district councils, and many of the matters that they deal with in the Assembly relate to the affairs of those councils. Furthermore, many matters that Members deal with in detail in Committees have implications for district councils.

Of course, Members from Dr Coulter's party who hold ministerial office are also members of Belfast City Council, and they do not feel that there is a conflict of interest. Consequently, his party leader might not be too pleased that he asked that question. If he is criticising his party leader and his party's Minister of Health because of the contradiction in their positions and their potential conflicts of interest, he should take that matter up with them. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the office that I hold and my role in Belfast City Council have led to any conflicts of interest.

Lord Browne: Has the Minister met with Belfast City Council — in his role as Minister of the Environment

— to discuss tall buildings in Belfast? As an elected member of Belfast City Council like me, he will know that the council supported the construction of the Aurora building. When will the draft policy and guidelines for tall buildings in Belfast be completed?

The Minister of the Environment: In May 2008, a cross-party delegation from Belfast City Council asked to meet my predecessor to discuss the matter of tall buildings in Belfast. A date was agreed before I became Minister, and I attended that meeting on 28 July 2008.

Given the number of applications for tall buildings in Belfast and the economic potential that they hold, I have made it clear that it would be appropriate to have a policy. Consequently, I have asked the Planning Service to prepare such a policy. I do not have a date on which it will be finalised, although I understand that consultants have been employed to begin work on guidance.

It is hoped that it will be brought to fruition fairly quickly, because the issue of tall buildings will not go away. Furthermore, applications of that nature can bring great economic benefit to a city, and Belfast would benefit from the impact that tall buildings, in the appropriate places, would have on its well-being.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he agree that his failure to resign from Belfast City Council leads to a conflict of interest in his present position? His defence to Rev Coulter was that other Ministers in the House are members of Belfast City Council and other councils. That is no defence; it merely confirms the view that there is a potential conflict of interest. When Arlene Foster was the Minister of the Environment — the position that Sammy Wilson holds now — she resigned from her local council in order to avoid a conflict of interest.

The Minister of the Environment: As the Member knows, I will do my own thing on these issues; I will not be guided by the actions of others. I make up my mind as to how I believe I should discharge my duties. It is ironic that the accusation comes from a Member who is also a member of Belfast City Council. On many occasions, he has to debate issues in the Assembly that affect not only Belfast City Council, but other areas. If he can remain objective, I believe that I am more capable of the required degree of objectivity than the Member for North Belfast.

PPS 21

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment when the independent working group on PPS 21 will publish a final report. (AQO 2068/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The independent working group is required to report to my Department by 26 June 2009.

Mr McGlone: How many deferrals have been determined under draft PPS 21 at the Planning Service's Omagh office? How many of those have been approved?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's memory must be short, because a letter that he wrote to one of the local newspapers was published in today's edition. He has quoted the figures in that letter, so I do not know why on earth he needs me to remind him of them. Perhaps Alzheimer's disease has set in. I will remind him of what is contained in the letter that he wrote to the newspaper. Some 280 applications have been deferred in the regional planning office that covers the Omagh, Strabane, Fermanagh, Dungannon and Cookstown council areas, and 41 of those applications have been approved. If Mr McGlone's maths are right — and I hope that they are better than his memory — that represents 14·64%. Therefore, that is 14·64% more applications than would have been granted under PPS 14. There will be 41 people in those areas who will be happy that I have introduced such a policy.

Across Northern Ireland, so far, there has been an approval rate of about 37%.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. May I be the first Member to welcome the Minister's return following his being sent to the DUP sin bin by his party colleagues last week. What guarantees are there that the recommendations from the independent working group, which will report in June, will be implemented?

The Minister of the Environment: I know that the Member would love to get rid of me from this position, but I assure him that I am here today, and I will be in this position at the next Question Time and for the foreseeable future. To paraphrase the Member's party leader, I am not going away, you know.

3.15 pm

The independent working group's recommendations will come first to me and then to the ministerial subgroup, in which we will consider them and, at that stage, determine what happens with them.

Mr Cree: Before PPS 14, the Planning Service advised that the number of new houses in the countryside exceeded the combined total of those in England, Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister advise the Assembly on what he thinks is a sustainable annual figure for new houses in future?

The Minister of the Environment: It would not be right for me to say what I believe to be a sustainable annual figure. In fact, I would not like to think that the suitability of planning applications would be determined on the basis of a quota. That will be determined on the basis of whether those applications comply with the policy that has been introduced. Applications that comply

with PPS 21 should be granted, but if they do not comply, they should not be granted. I have no idea, and the Member could not reasonably expect me to have an idea, of how many successful applications there should be.

I must emphasise that that planning policy is designed to achieve two aims. The first is to ensure that those people who need to live in the countryside have the opportunity to do so, and that rural communities are sustained and are sustainable. The second aim is to preserve what I believe to be a very important part of our natural heritage — the landscape of our rural communities and our rural areas. The planning policy is designed to achieve those two aims, and every application will be judged against them.

Planning Service: Overhaul

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment for a progress report on the Programme for Government commitment to overhaul the Planning Service.

(AQO 2069/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A comprehensive programme of reform of the planning system is well under way. Improvement is being made in the short term through various process improvements, such as a streamlined council consultation scheme. Parallel to that, officials have been working to develop detailed policy proposals for reform in the medium to longer term. Those proposals take account of the transfer of planning functions to the proposed 11 new councils in May 2011, under the review of public administration (RPA).

Subject to receiving Executive approval, I hope to publish the proposals shortly for a period of public consultation. That is a critical next step on the path to meeting the Programme for Government commitment and the PSA 22 commitment to ensure that a fit-for-purpose legislative framework for the planning system is put in place by March 2011.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister account for the spiralling costs of ePIC — the electronic planning information for citizens project — which increased from £5·5 million to £12·8 million? Was that project re-tendered? Would the Minister not be better spending his time controlling costs in his Department rather than publicly criticising civil servants and espousing ridiculous views on energy efficiency, renewable energy and climate change?

The Minister of the Environment: When it comes to lectures on protecting the environment, the last person to whom I will turn is a member of the Beggs family, whose expertise when it comes to protecting the environment revolves around landfill and illegal dumping. The Member might bear that in mind before

he starts to lecture me about my role as Minister of the Environment.

As far as the spiralling costs of ePIC are concerned, I am not trying to wash my hands of the matter, but most of those costs were incurred during the very early part of the process. I inherited the current system, and I have asked tough questions about the costs of the ePIC project. The project was not re-tendered, because to start all over again would have led to increased costs and could have left the Department open to court action by the firm that held the contract.

I must also point out that some additional things were put onto the system, making it a bit more complex than was originally intended. However, I assure the House that I will keep an eye on the costs. I hope that we now have a tender document that is much tighter than it was in the past, and that we will deliver ePIC, which is an important part of planning reform, in so far as it will give the public and developers greater accessibility to their planning applications, and it should also cut down on much of the administrative costs in the system.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister back. No doubt, Stephen Nolan will be looking for him shortly. Perhaps he can also make provision for the poor old polar bears now that they are an endangered species in his constituency.

What provision or new measures will the Minister provide to ensure that councillors will be trained adequately to ensure that the new planning procedures will be put in place when functions transfer to the super councils? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: I want to correct the Member. Polar bears and polar bear colonies are thriving; they are not in decline. I give him that piece of information for nothing.

The Member asked about an important issue. For those who wish to see local government functioning properly after May 2011, it is important that councillors who take on planning responsibilities are properly trained and have the capacity to deal properly with planning decisions. For that reason, the planning reform proposals include actions that will help to have councillors trained in that area.

Sinn Féin members on the strategic leadership board have been helpful in preparing for RPA. However, the planning reform proposals are being held up in the Office of the deputy First Minister — and I know that the Chief Whip of the Member's party might not be too happy with him for raising the issue. Nevertheless, we are reaching a deadline, and if we do not get the proposals out for public consultation and start moving towards the legislative requirements, we will find ourselves in a difficult position when it comes to

delivering that reform before May 2011. I will be more than grateful for any help that the Member can give me in getting those proposals to the Executive so that they can go out for public consultation.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister referred to the streamlining process, and we all agree that that is a good thing. However, will the Minister comment on the fact that if developers — particularly apartment developers — do not get approval for 40 apartments, they withdraw and defer and come back with proposals for 30 apartments, and if they do not get 30, they withdraw and defer, and the process goes on and on. Does the Minister agree that that exercise defeats the purpose of what we are trying to do, which is to push the planning process forward?

The Minister of the Environment: Part of the Member's question is correct. The streamlining process has had a dramatic effect where it has worked. Where it has been introduced so far, for example in the Londonderry area, the average time for applications that go through the streamlined process has been reduced from 89 days to 28 days, and 20% of applications are being not only processed but decisions issued within 20 days. That is a remarkable turnaround, and it has a big impact locally.

Nevertheless, the Member is right. I have told planning officers that we should no longer be in a position where we work with developers and negotiate down by increments. Apart from the fact that it messes up the planning system, it also means that an officer's time is tied up in those negotiations and looking at changed plans — sometimes with minor alterations only.

Of course, the other issue is that objectors are kept on tenterhooks, because they must constantly return to the matter to consider amendments. One reason why we have introduced the front-loaded pre-application arrangement is to try to get developers to understand, at the very outset, what is likely to be acceptable and what is outside the ballpark. Then, if they lodge an application, they have only themselves to blame if it is turned down after one go. That is the way forward. The Member is right, we must free up resources to deal with applications quickly.

Mr Gallagher: The report 'Foundations for the Future' commented on the third-party right of appeal. It made it quite clear that it should be considered only in well-qualified circumstances, because, obviously, if there was a free-for-all, it would make the planning process impossible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please ask a question.

Mr Gallagher: Do the planning reforms under consideration in the Department contain some facility for a third-party right of appeal?

The Minister of the Environment: The emerging findings paper will have already indicated that I am not in favour of third-party appeals. Of course, the point of holding consultations on planning reform is to give people the opportunity to make an argument for third-party appeals. Despite the arguments that have been made in support of third-party appeals, they are not a panacea. The way to get community buy-in for planning applications is to have the community consultation front-loaded, not end-loaded. Rather than giving people the right to fight a decision once it has been made, they should instead be given an opportunity to have input before an application has even been submitted.

I want to mention one issue that is contained in the emerging findings paper and that will be dealt with in the planning reform paper — indeed, it is an issue that will form part of the consultation. When making an application, developers will be required to show not only that they have consulted people, but how they have consulted them and how they have tried to deal with the objections raised by the people who will be affected by the development. To my mind, that is a much better approach: before anybody's mind is made up, the public gets an opportunity to have their say, and, hopefully, planning applications can be tailored to meet the needs of local people and to take account of their views.

Aurora Building

5. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the planning application by McAllister Holdings for the Aurora Building, Great Victoria Street, Belfast. (AQO 2070/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Belfast City Council has referred the application to the Planning Service management board for consideration and reassessment, and I have decided that it is best that the application is dealt with by that process.

Mr McFarland: I thank the “Minister for Entertainment” for his answer. He is in good form today as usual.

Does the Minister not find that there is a degree of incongruity between, on the one hand, his duties as the Environment Minister, and, on the other, his lobbying for planning applications and his criticism of his own planning staff?

The Minister of the Environment: That question has been asked time and again. The argument seems to be that when someone becomes a Minister, somehow or other they cease to have constituency responsibilities. I am in this Chamber because constituents have elected me to it. I happen to have been given a post — in the meantime anyhow — *[Laughter.]* — as the Minister of a Department. However, that does not mean that I no

longer have an obligation to represent my constituents. When I talk to planning officers about a planning application, I am simply carrying out my constituency duty. The one occasion on which it is not right for me either to listen to applicants or objectors or to make representations is when I have to make the final decision on a planning application that is subject to article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

The record will show that, when dealing with such applications, I have adhered to the requirement to remain separate from the planning process until the officers submit a report to me with a recommendation on which I must make a judgement.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish in the Workplace

1. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department actively encourages the use of Irish in the workplace. (AQO 2086/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): No.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer, even though it was somewhat sarcastic. Does he accept that there is a greater onus on him — *[Interruption.]*

May I finish my question?

— to recognise the Irish language now that it has secured level-3 status under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I assure the Member that I was not being sarcastic. The Member mentioned the use of Irish and its status — she is correct about the status that it has attained. The requirements of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages are being fully met by the Department. I would hope that, in the workplace, we could concentrate on trying to deliver better services for the entire community, rather than being sidetracked on language issues such as that which the Member has raised.

Mr Shannon: A report on the matter is published. Will the Minister confirm when the third periodic report will be published?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member is correct to say that periodic reports are published. The third report is awaiting Executive consideration. The deputy First Minister made substantive comments on the report, which, along with the comments of others, were incorporated, as appropriate. The deputy First Minister has been considering the report,

including those comments, since 11 November 2008. I will bring the report to the Executive as soon as I can.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire — agus tá súil agam go dtabharfaidh sé freagra níos fuide uirthi ná a thug sé ar an chéad cheist: cad é atá déanta ag an Aire leis an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ó rinneadh Aire de? I hope that the Minister's answer to my question will be longer than the one that he gave to the initial question. What work has he done to promote the Irish language since he became Minister?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is remarkable that Ministers and politicians are criticised when they give fulsome and protracted responses, yet I am criticised when I do the complete opposite and give a concise and specific answer.

The honourable Member has taken a consistent line in his approach to the issue. However, he has found that I have taken an equally consistent line. There will not be an Irish-language Act; however, those who choose to use Irish or Ulster Scots should be facilitated to do so. That was the position, and it will remain the position for the foreseeable future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McGlone is not in his place to ask question 2.

London Olympics

3. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given the timing of his decision not to proceed with the multi-sports stadium at the Maze site, if it is still possible for his Department to have an alternative stadium ready in time for the London Olympics, as had been envisioned for the sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQO 2088/09)

Sports Stadium

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if it is his Department's preference to proceed with one multi-sports stadium or for three separate stadium projects for the Gaelic Athletic Association, Irish Football Association and Ulster Rugby. (AQO 2092/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 3 and 7 together.

In line with the commitment that I gave to the Assembly on 12 January 2009, I forwarded my conclusions on the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze to the Executive on 27 January. In my paper to the Executive, I advised that I had reviewed all the evidence available to me, including meeting with the governing bodies involved, and I had come to the view

that the Maze proposal should not proceed. I also advised that I intended to have a further series of discussions with the governing bodies of the sports involved in order to explore alternatives. I have already had initial meetings with the relevant governing bodies, and I have asked them to review their options on stadia provision and to report back to me. Accordingly, there is no preferred option at the moment.

With regard to stadium provision for use during the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games in 2012, Northern Ireland's capability to actively participate could only be fully determined once a decision is taken on the preferred stadium option or options. However, I am considering the possibility of supporting a limited remedial programme of work at Windsor Park, so that international football can continue to be played there until a longer-term solution is found. Any support will be subject to an approved business case and to satisfactory assurances from the Irish Football Association and Linfield Football Club on future arrangements for maintaining the venue. That interim work may allow for some Olympics-related events to take place.

Mr O'Loan: How much money does the Minister have in his budget for stadium development? How much have the Minister and his Department spent and, therefore, inevitably, wasted on the Maze project?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member posed a classic leading question when he asked how much has been spent and, therefore, wasted. He knows the facts as well as I do, and, I suspect, as well everyone else in the Chamber does, and they are that the issue of the multi-sports stadium was exceptionally complex. It was in the ether for many months and years preceding my arrival at the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Therefore, it was always going to be a difficult choice. However, I have never shied away from taking difficult decisions. Having taken that decision, removed the uncertainty and brought clarity to the situation, we must now move forward.

I am delighted that we are now in the position whereby governing bodies can examine a very limited number of options. We are not going back to square one. There are a limited number of options available, so progress can be made quickly and practically in an attempt to bring clarity and to ensure that football, rugby and gaelic are catered for in the stadia provision. The 2007 budget gave capital provision of £70 million to the multi-sports stadium project over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will know that, since 29 January, officials from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have been in regular contact with his departmental officials to try to secure a meeting between the Minister

and the Committee on the subject of the multi-sports stadium. As Chairperson of the Committee, I subsequently followed up that request in writing. Will the Minister pin down with our Committee staff a suitable date to discuss the matter? After all, it is a Government scrutiny Committee, and one could be forgiven for thinking that the Minister is trying to avoid the Committee.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Four weeks ago, I said that I would undertake a series of discussions with the governing bodies.

I did that within two weeks of taking the decision. Unfortunately, a leak was made to the media about the document at that time. If anyone has any information as to who was responsible for that leak, I would be delighted to receive that information and to take the appropriate action.

The Member seems to think that I am avoiding a meeting with the Committee. Since I took office in June last year, I have appeared before the Committee on every occasion on which I was asked to do so. We will reach a consensus on the best date — which I hope will be in the immediate future — and I will be glad to answer any questions that the Committee may wish to put to me in respect of this matter. I am sure that we will have a healthy and robust debate, and I will stand over everything that I will say to the Committee — I hope that the members can do likewise.

Mr McNarry: In view of the mounting failure to find private sponsorship for the London Olympic venues, are there any opportunities for Northern Ireland? Can the Minister say at what speed he will be able to move on the alternatives to the Maze site, to facilitate access to such opportunities?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for raising the question in that way. I recall that other Members, both in the House and outside, indicated that, had the opposite decision had been taken — had I decided to proceed with the Maze stadium — it would, in some way, bring relief to the hard-pressed construction industry which faces the economic downturn.

However, even had a decision to proceed been taken, not a brick would have been laid before 18 months had passed. Everyone ought to know that. However, despite that, Members chose to make political capital. Their comments were nonsensical. Building work could not have started immediately; it could not have started within an 18-month to two-year period.

The Member asks how quickly we can proceed, and I want to proceed very quickly. I have met the three governing bodies and have indicated that I wish to receive their options within a matter of weeks. In the next few weeks, I hope to have a tiny, finite number of options that represent the governing bodies' preferences,

and I will get to work immediately. We can make progress quickly now that the uncertainty has been removed.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister said that everyone knew that £3.8 million — nearly £4 million — has been spent, squandered or wasted on the Maze site. I hope that that is so. Is it possible that some value can be salvaged in the preparation of an alternative site from the lost consultancy fees and documents?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. I did not mean that everyone knew that the expenditure had been of that order. My mention of widespread knowledge was with reference to a different point.

I hope, and have told local representatives in Lagan Valley and elsewhere, that, now that the uncertainty has been removed, other developments — that can, should and must occur at the site — are able to proceed on a more efficacious basis. That must happen now as a matter of the utmost priority. I hope that some of the preparatory work for the multi-sports stadium can be utilised in the development of that much-needed site. In the short-to-medium term, we could then see progress in developing genuinely world-class facilities at that site.

Creative Industries Fund

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide details of the take-up of the £5m Creative Industries Fund that was announced last autumn. (AQO 2089/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Following its launch last October, there has been a high degree of interest in the creative industries innovation fund. It is administered by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and an initial call for applications was made, to sectoral bodies only, in October 2008.

3.45 pm

The Arts Council undertook a competitive assessment process and I will announce in the near future the outcome of the first call. A second call for applications from creative enterprises opened on 5 January and closed on 5 February. The Arts Council has advised that more than 350 applications were received, considerably higher than the level that was expected. I believe that that is due, in no small part, to the successful marketing campaign undertaken by the Arts Council, which included presentations across Northern Ireland and close liaison with all 32 local enterprise agencies.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. The strategic action plan indicates that there are more than 2,500 creative enterprises in Northern Ireland employing almost 35,000 people, and that there is a specific goal to grow that sector by 15%

by 2011. In light of that growth and planned development, will the Minister tell the House what the Arts Council is doing to promote creative industries innovations to ensure that all parts of Northern Ireland benefit from that funding?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. His rationale is one that is often utilised in the Chamber when Members ask about the geographic spread. I am delighted to inform him that, in so far as it has been possible, there has been a widespread number of information seminars, at centres including the Ards Art Centre in Newtownards; the Strule Arts Centre in Omagh; the North West Regional College, Limavady; the Southern Regional College, Newry; Space Craft in Belfast; the Presidents' Club, Belfast; the Noribic Centre, Londonderry; the Craft Centre, Ballycastle; Work West, Belfast; and Oxford Island, Craigavon.

In addition, the 32 local enterprise agencies were provided with copies of the presentation. I am sure that the Member will be aware that Belfast City Council also promotes the fund by providing links on its website to the appropriate pages on the Arts Council website. I hope that Members will agree that there has been a comprehensive attempt to publicise the fund as widely as possible. The take-up — as measured by the response so far — would appear to indicate that that was money well spent.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I know that political manners and leadership are not qualities of which the Minister displays a lot. However, through the Deputy Speaker I will ask: what is the next step for those applicants who made bids for funding, particularly in relation to the 5 February 2008 deadline?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I made clear the closing deadline for applications. The Arts Council will now look at all the applications. As I said in response to a previous question, given the geographical spread of the information, I am hopeful that there will be a broad spread of resources across Northern Ireland. I cannot prejudge the outcome because there are criteria to be met. However, I am hopeful that people right across Northern Ireland will benefit from the fund.

Mr K Robinson: I note that in the Minister's response to the initial question, and in his geographical response, he omitted south and east Antrim, so I will make a bid for those areas now. Has the Minister assessed the job-creating potential of the creative industries fund spending, from the primary investments and the knock-on opportunities?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member raises a pertinent point. The total amount of the fund is £5 million, which is a considerable sum. I

would have liked there to have been more money available, but we have to work within the current Budget. However, I am hopeful that there will be considerable job-creation capacity within the limitations of the fund.

If that fund were to prove as successful as I hope, given the initial interest in it, it would strengthen my case for going back to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to say that a subsequent fund of a similar type should be set up. I hope that such a fund would be as successful as the current one, and, if more money were invested, a greater return might be made.

Theatre Funding

5. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there will be additional funding made available for (i) the Waterside Theatre; (ii) the Playhouse; and (iii) An Gaeláras in Derry/Londonderry, to allow them to maximise the use of their facilities when refurbishment is complete. (AQO 2090/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Waterside Theatre, the Playhouse and An Gaeláras have all received funding from the north-west challenge fund towards their capital arts projects. All three projects have subsequently received additional funding beyond their original allocations from the fund.

Funding for the arts is dispersed through the Arts Council. The Arts Council has advised that it is fully aware of the needs of the arts venues in Londonderry, which have been undergoing capital development. It is currently assessing applications under the annual support for organisations programme, including applications for increased funding from those venues. The Arts Council will make its decisions in February 2009, and it will notify the applicants of the outcome during March 2009. Any further requests for additional capital funding will require the completion of a business case and will be dependent on the availability of funds.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Waterside Theatre project has found itself in difficulties through no fault of its own. Does the Minister agree that, in order to optimise the capital investment, there will be a requirement for ongoing revenue support?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for raising the issue of the Waterside Theatre. On a local level and on a ministerial level, I am aware of those issues, which were well outside the theatre's control. People representing the Waterside Theatre have been in touch with the Department, and we are discussing what assistance we can offer to the theatre in the light of the circumstances in which it finds itself.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister assessed how many jobs have been created by his Department through its overall investment of public money? What is the geographical distribution of those jobs?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am a bit unclear whether the Member was referring to the original question. If he was, I have not received any information about the number of jobs that have been created, but the three projects that were listed in the original question have total project costs in excess of £8 million. Although I do not have the figures, I am fairly certain that there has been significant job creation. I will endeavour to establish a precise number — if a precise number can be established — and I will write to the Member with the details.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I noticed that when the Minister said “An Gaeláras”, it did not burn his lips. Perhaps speaking Irish is not always the end of the world. When groups find out whether they are to receive funding, are the reasons for not receiving it made clear? Sometimes, there is a feeling that some groups get funding and others do not. The process of allowing more funding to be made is not very clear.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member referred to my use of Irish. I am happy to use any one of a number of languages from any one of a number of countries. I am quite content to do that, and we should all open up our minds to other cultures and countries, where possible.

The Member referred to applications that, for whatever reason, do not clear the system and are rejected. It is important that, where it is possible and practicable, the applicants establish for themselves understanding of why they did not receive funding so that they can see that the criteria are fair, reasonable and applied across the board. On future applications, therefore, they can ensure that, where possible, they might meet the criteria, rather than falling short of it.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister say what criteria were applied to applications for additional funding?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: That follows on neatly from the previous question. The applications for additional funding were individually assessed by a steering group, with consideration given to the overall funding package for the project as a whole, any potential shortfalls that might jeopardise delivery of the project and the possibility of losing other funding sources. The steering group supported the bids, and final amounts were determined and approved at ministerial level, as was appropriate.

Foras na Gaeilge

6. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any delays in filling Foras na Gaeilge posts which were approved in 2001.

(AQO 2091/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The total staffing complement for Foras na Gaeilge was outlined in the agency's 10-year strategic plan from 2001, which was agreed by both North/South Ministerial Council Ministers. A number of issues have contributed to Foras na Gaeilge's failure to attain its agreed complement of staff. Those issues include the Irish Government's decentralisation policy, which has resulted in protracted negotiations with unions about which posts should move to Gweedore in the Irish Republic. I understand that Foras na Gaeilge has also had difficulties with the recruitment and retention of staff.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, is he able to specify why Foras na Gaeilge has failed to fill those posts?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the same way as I was content to be specific and precise in my answer to previous questions, I will endeavour to be so in answer to this one.

Market forces have contributed to Foras na Gaeilge's well-recognised staff-retention problems. I understand that the recruitment of specialist staff, such as professional accountants and editors, with sufficient Irish-language skills has been problematic. As I have stated, the posts in Gweedore cannot be filled until Foras na Gaeilge and the trade unions resolve their positions.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister know whether the issue of pay disparity between Foras na Gaeilge in the North and in the South has been sorted out?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am unsure to which disparity the Member refers — whether he means a disparity in wage structures or something else. I will try to provide a written reply after I read the Hansard report.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Has the Minister considered job-sharing possibilities involving Scottish Gaelic language providers and local minority-language providers that make use of EU funding mechanisms and that may, consequently, save public money?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On the face of it, the Member's question makes some sense. I must establish whether it is as straightforward as his question makes it sound. However, I will certainly draw his suggestion to the attention of the Ulster-Scots Agency, Foras na Gaeilge and associated bodies in order to establish whether job-sharing is possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No 7 has been answered.

Irish-Language Groups

8. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many meetings he has held with Irish-language groups since taking up his office.
(AQO 2093/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have received four invitations to meet representatives and Irish-language groups to discuss the Irish-language position, all of which I accepted. Those meetings were with Foras na Gaeilge on 8 July 2008, Pobal on 30 September 2008 and a delegation of the Irish Guild of the Church of Ireland on 19 January 2009.

On 20 October 2008, I also met a Sinn Féin Member for West Belfast and other representatives of that party for an in-depth, comprehensive and robust discussion on Irish-language issues. I look forward to any further such meeting.

4.00 pm

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

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Supply Resolution for the 2008-2009 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Vote on Account

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £12,485,717,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,730,008,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,618,965,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £7,078,596,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2009-10 document that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr D Bradley): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mar is gnách, tá an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo, agus beidh mé ag labhairt inniu mar LeasChathaoirleach Choiste Oideachais an Tionóil.

I am pleased to participate in the debate as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. In that role, I want to draw Members' attention to certain

aspects of the Department of Education's 2008-09 budget and some of the pressures that it has registered to date for its 2009-2010 budget.

The spring Supplementary Estimates reflect changes that have arisen during in-year monitoring rounds. I will focus at first on some of the Committee's concerns about the Department's 2008-09 budget. The Committee questioned senior officials on the impact of the removal of efficiency savings from the schools budget with regard to reductions in the number of teachers and front line school staff. Efficiency savings in the schools budget for 2008-09 totalled £39.5 million; £72 million for 2009-2010; and around £103 million for 2010-11.

The Committee was concerned that the Department did not have figures to hand on the number of teacher reductions as a result of those substantial baseline cuts to the schools budget at classroom level, and it pressed for a larger percentage of the education budget to be devolved directly to schools.

The Committee for Education takes particular interest in the Department's underspend and reduced requirements from in-year monitoring rounds. It was concerned by two recent examples that did not involve substantial money: the surrender of money for science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) in schools; and the integrated development fund for disadvantaged children under the west Belfast/greater Shankill initiative. The Committee viewed that as poor monitoring and lack of control over scarce and limited resources in those important areas.

The Committee for Education, in conjunction with two other Statutory Committees, has organised an event to promote STEM subjects, which will take place in the Long Gallery at lunchtime on Wednesday 18 February 2009. Members are most welcome to attend that event.

Turning to the Department of Education's 2009-2010 budget, the Committee awaits the Minister of Education's proposed actions to deal with a gap in resources of around £60 million, much of which appears as inescapable pressures, such as costs that arise from pay reviews, job evaluations, pensions and redundancy costs. Clearly, re-prioritisation of elements of the education budget must be considered soon. The Committee will examine closely the Minister's proposals in that regard.

As I mentioned earlier, the Committee for Education has taken particular interest in the Department's efficiency delivery plan. One important element is the efficiency savings that will arise from the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA). Some £21 million of savings are projected in 2009-2010 and 2010-11. The Committee recently heard from senior departmental officials and ESA's chief executive designate on the authority's outline business

plan. That basically suggests that £50 million of the education budget should be invested to save £20 million per annum with further potential savings.

The proposals given to the Committee state that the £20 million of annual savings would be put into front line services, namely school classrooms, to improve education standards. However, I regret to report to the House that the Committee has distinct fears that any savings generated from the establishment of ESA may very well be swallowed up in efficiency savings and never make their way to the classroom to benefit pupils. I say "any savings" because the evidence session on the outline business case, which was reported by Hansard, identified many gaps and questions on where savings will be made.

The Committee is awaiting the full business case and will revisit its concerns and inform the House during its Committee Stage report on the Education Bill, or earlier, if possible.

The Committee scrutinises the education budget on a regular basis and takes that role very seriously. We have at least one session with senior departmental officials per month. Some weighty decisions on budget priorities will have to be taken over the coming year. I assure Members that the Committee will continue to examine those decisions closely and report to the House as appropriate.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's debate on behalf of the Committee for Education.

Mr Elliott: All Departments — and the Minister of Finance, in particular — have had to deal with the rolling lack of finance. It has been difficult to match some of the resources required, especially with the necessary efficiency savings being demanded.

I want to refer specifically to a couple of issues concerning the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I know that the Department placed huge emphasis on completing the farm nutrient management scheme by 31 December 2008. There was a major impasse along the way when there appeared to have been agreement between the DFP and DARD over the sale of Crossnacreevy. Indeed, I understand that the DFP guaranteed the DARD finance to complete the scheme.

That scheme has been a success for the Department, and many of us are hugely appreciative of that. However, it has not been without difficulty, and, even though it has been completed, there is still a shortfall in its finances. Bids have been made in both the December and February monitoring rounds to try to complete the scheme's jigsaw of finance. I am concerned that the money required may not all be available and that some farmers who completed the scheme late on may have to wait some time to get their full moneys.

I am hopeful that that matter will be resolved; however, I am concerned that it will not be.

I want to mention some immediate issues that arose throughout the year and that had difficulty securing finance. In August 2008, severe flooding affected many farmers, especially cereal and potato farmers. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development reacted slowly in providing finance, even though not a huge amount was required to alleviate the hardship. At that time, homeowners whose houses flooded received compensation within a short timescale. However, although only small numbers of farmers were affected, some lost their livelihoods for the entire year. They could not access the support and financial assistance that they urgently needed. A quicker reaction from the Department would have been more appropriate.

The dioxin scare in December 2008 resulted in similar problems. I am concerned that it has taken representatives of the Executive nine weeks to make a case in Europe, given that our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland had their case sewn up early — almost before Northern Ireland knew about the situation. I am hugely concerned about the slow reaction to a serious situation. Removing some cattle and animals from farms more quickly could have helped to alleviate the difficult situation internationally and to clear our products without undue difficulty.

When the Programme for Government and Budget were being drawn up last year, I commented on the roads budget. I had huge concerns about the amount of finance that was allocated, particularly for structural maintenance. In the past couple of days, I have researched that matter and have discovered that, in the 2006-07 financial year, one region received well over £2 million for structural maintenance, whereas this year it received only £1.5 million, which is 77% of its allocation from two years ago. Furthermore, that figure does not take into account the increased cost of the products, which have, in some cases, risen by 50%.

People talk about introducing traffic-calming measures in towns and villages. However, most roads in Northern Ireland have inbuilt traffic-calming measures, because drivers must zigzag to avoid potholes and poor surfaces. The rural communities, particularly those west of the Bann, are concerned because they do not have public-transport systems similar to those in the east of the Province. We do not have a train service or the same level of bus service, and we are desperately dependent on those roads and on the car. Therefore, more money should be allocated to roads in the structural maintenance budget. It is important to the Province's economy. The west of the Province will miss out badly on economic success if it does not have the funds to carry out structural maintenance.

Mr Shannon: Tom Elliott mentioned roads in the west of Province. When he is available, I will take him to Strangford and Ards, where he will experience poor roads.

At this time, there are no easy jobs in the Executive. All Departments are under a certain amount of pressure to meet the needs that are presented to them, especially during the economic crisis. However, some Departments are undoubtedly under more stress, especially the Department of Finance and Personnel. People who are struggling expect that Department to implement changes and, at this time, more people look to the Minister, Nigel Dodds, to help improve their lives.

Many middle-class families are struggling, losing their businesses and face losing their homes. They are hoping for some kind of intervention.

Thus far, the Minister has provided an extra £400 million to defer water charges and a further £100 million to tackle a range of issues, including the backdating of Civil Service pay.

4.15 pm

The Titanic signature project wi' £43.5 million es pairt o' hit's ain economic package hes bein becked bae the Executive an' the Finance Meenester hes alloood at eh bes mindit at the devolved Meenesters dae ivrything at thair fit tae dae tae heft femmelies, consairns an' the economy. Eh hes alloood at we ir waarkin wi' the constraints o' a block grant o' catter. Oan account o' thon we havnae the freedom o' manouvre laike a national Government wud hae bit thon dusnae stap iz fae taakin positive steps tae heft the fowk o' the Province.

The Titanic signature project, with a £43.5 million investment as part of its own economic package, has been backed by the Executive, and the Finance Minister has expressed his determination that the devolved Ministers do whatever they can to help families, companies and the economy. He has acknowledged that we are operating within the constraints of a block allocation of money and that we therefore do not have the freedom of manoeuvre that a national Government would have. However, that does not stop us from taking positive steps to help the people of the Province.

We are all aware of the record to date and the major decisions that have been made, such as freezing the regional rate from 2008-2011; capping industrial rates at 30%, and freezing business rates in real terms. Free prescriptions and free public transport for the over-60s have also been introduced, and we know the pressure that that has relieved in homes with illnesses around the Province. There is no doubt that the Finance Department and its Minister have taken steps to make this hard time a little easier and will continue to do so.

That is why I find it difficult to fully comprehend some of the statements that have been made, one of

which was made by a Member for Strangford. I heard little or no positive ideas about what he would do differently and what he would bring to the table. I heard only negative comments and remarks, which will certainly not put heat into homes across the Province. That is in contrast to his own leader, Sir Reg Empey, who acknowledged in positive terms, on 'The Politics Show', that the Programme for Government was working well. I find it difficult to understand what a rewrite of the Budget would do, if such a rewrite were possible; there is no new money. Where should the money be taken from? Should it be siphoned from different Departments? Who do we rob, and who do we pay first — the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

I ask the Ulster Unionist Party — and perhaps the next Member to speak can respond — what its Members think of the Conservative Party's plans to drastically cut public spending, even more so than the Labour Party. Are they happy with their party — the "Conservative Unionists" — to be associated with Tory financial policy? When people do not spend, businesses cannot survive, and in time the Province will be in a worse state. I am more than confident in the steps that our Finance Minister is taking. He has the best interests of the Province at heart; that is his goal and his focus.

The steps that have been taken are not the end of our route to prosperity. Despite the pressures, the DUP Finance Minister is continuing to deliver. Action has been taken to reduce rates burdens on small businesses. We will deliver over £1.4 billion on construction projects this financial year, compared with £676 million five years ago. Again, that is a very clear step forward. That is helping schools, roads, hospitals, and many other areas.

Over the next 10 years, the Department will deliver £20 billion of capital projects through the investment strategy, working closely with the small and medium-sized enterprises. There have been unprecedented levels of investment in key Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which enjoys its highest ever budget — £4.3 billion. That is an area that most people agree is in real need of investment no matter what else is happening.

What is important now is for Departments to declare likely underspend and not wait until it is too late to make a difference. Money that is not allocated for some reason will not help anybody anywhere, whereas the opposite is true — money can be allocated for projects with a short turnaround, such as buildings, which will create construction jobs that would be permanent fixtures. That will not be possible if Departments hold on to their underspend until the twelfth hour, by which time it will be too late.

In conclusion, the Department of Finance and Personnel has done a sterling job thus far in a hard time. I lend my wholehearted support to the continuance of the work that has been started by the Minister, Nigel Dodds, and his Department, and I ask Members to do the same thing, and support the motion.

Mr Neeson: The Executive's priority in the Programme for Government was to grow the economy. Unfortunately, the Programme for Government was drawn up before the current economic downturn began. The real question is whether the necessary resources are in the Budget to deal with the current situation. In particular, what are the Executive's plans for financing public-sector projects in areas such as social housing, road and rail infrastructure, and the upgrading of schools and hospitals, all of which can assist the construction industry in these very difficult times?

Last week, representatives from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) appeared before the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Among other issues, they emphasised the importance of expanding the tourism industry in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the current value of sterling against the euro. Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the Executive, give me assurances today about the existing proposals for the signature projects, particularly those at the Titanic Quarter and the Giant's Causeway?

In the current situation, my party is not convinced that the Executive are focused enough on developing the green economy. As I said in the House last week, President Obama has already shown leadership on that issue. There is clear evidence that global warming is happening at an accelerated pace, and we in Northern Ireland should consider that to be an opportunity rather than a threat. By the same token, the relevant agencies should be encouraging the development of renewable-energy projects, including wind power, tidal power and generation of electricity from waste.

I must question the commitment to improving public transport in Northern Ireland. In particular, I want a complete commitment from the Executive to purchase new trains, which are urgently needed on the Larne line. Furthermore, at a local level, I seek assurances that the upgrading of the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast road and the A8 Larne to Belfast road will proceed on schedule.

I appreciate that times are difficult, but it is vital that the Executive and the Assembly get their priorities right. That is what the community expects of us, and that is what devolution is all about. The challenge is there in the Budget. We must show flexibility, and priorities must be developed as the economic climate changes.

Mr Poots: The debate has been interesting thus far, having identified the range of opinions that exists in the Broad Church that is the Ulster Unionist Party. We

had Mr McNarry — “Dave the brave”, “hatchet man” McNarry — who wants to cut all around him; Basil McCrea, who wants us all to work together; Sir Reg Empey, who supports the emphasis on the economy; and Mr McGimpsey, who thinks that the only thing that matters is the health budget. The Broad Church of the Ulster Unionist Party has produced a broad range of opinions — it is certainly not a very cohesive group. Perhaps when it joins with the Conservatives, it will have a different range of opinions, and it will support the Executive’s implementation of even more cuts than Mr McNarry wants to see.

Some people have suggested today that we should re-prioritise the Budget. However, let us go back to what was contained in the Budget at the outset. The Budget’s key priority was the economy. Is anyone suggesting that, in a global recession, when people all over the world are losing their jobs and banks are going bankrupt, that we should shift the focus away from the economy to other matters? We will only resolve the difficulties in social housing, health, education and many other areas if we have a strong and vibrant economy. Therefore, it is right that we focus on the economy and not on other areas. Re-prioritisation would be madness.

I agree with leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, because he did not accept the assertion of his spokesman on financial affairs, Mr McNarry, that the Programme for Government, which is barely a year old, is dead in the water. Rather, Sir Reg welcomed the fact that the economy is at the top of the list of priorities — which is where it should be.

Sir Reg did not accept that the structures were wrong; therefore, I am not sure where “hatchet man” McNarry is taking his leadership from on this issue, whether it is from David Cameron or Sir Reg Empey; but I am glad that Sir Reg Empey is playing his role and is being part of the Executive team. I trust that his influence will come to bear whenever the vote on this motion takes place this evening.

I also trust that my Lagan Valley colleague Basil McCrea — with whom I do not always agree, but who on this occasion is absolutely right about the need to work together — will use his influence to ensure that Mr McNarry does not go traipsing through the ‘No’ Lobby and divide the House as part of some petty political point-scoring exercise. If Mr McNarry were successful, there would be no money in April for any Department to spend. That is the logic that Mr McNarry has applied in this instance.

During these times, we are much better off being linked to the economy of the United Kingdom. Over the past 10 years, people have looked enviously southwards and have said how much better Northern Ireland would be doing if it were part of the great Celtic

tiger. I remember an advertisement for the ESSO oil company that used the slogan “put a tiger in your tank”.

Mr Wells: The Member is showing his age.

Mr Poots: I can barely remember the advert; I was in short trousers at that time. The slogan was “put a tiger in your tank”; however, the tank appears to have run empty for that particular tiger and could do with refuelling.

In January alone, there were as many people added to the unemployment list in the Republic of Ireland as there are on the unemployment list in Northern Ireland. That identifies the nature of the problems that exist in the Republic of Ireland. I do not wish that country ill, in any respect, because I know that Northern Ireland benefited significantly when the economy in the Republic was strong. However, I am glad that Northern Ireland is not closely attached to the Republic’s current economic problems — being trapped in the euro zone and losing serious numbers of jobs, which its Government’s finances are unable to withstand. We, in Northern Ireland, do well from our attachment to the United Kingdom’s economy, which, despite all its problems, is still the fifth largest in the world.

A Member spoke earlier about the difficulties in implementing the infrastructure programme and about how the Government had failed because they were supposed to spend £1·8 billion but only spent £1·4 billion. Of course, some people tend to overlook the realities of life and do not observe them particularly well. This year, £1·3 billion to £1·4 billion was supposed to be spent on infrastructure projects, which is an increase of £600 million from previous years. In reality, the figure of £1·8 billion was based on additional money being gained from the sale of assets.

Is any Member recommending that this Government sell off their assets now when the market is down? Any sensible, rational individual who has an asset and wishes, but is not being forced, to dispose of it will wait until the market levels out and there is a better opportunity to maximise the income that he will receive from the sale. Therefore, the headlong rush to sell that asset —

4.30 pm

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I understand his logic, and I agree that it would not be prudent to sell assets at this time. However, does he agree that the miscalculation in relation to the Crossnacreevy site was beyond belief and had nothing to do with the fall in the market? All of a sudden, land that had been valued at £200 million was worth only a maximum of £6 million. Does the Member believe that that situation should and could have been avoided, and does he agree that it was an embarrassment to this Government?

Mr Poots: I certainly think that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development got that badly wrong. One can put development value on a particular piece of land only when it has received approval for development. Therefore, valuing agricultural land by placing a development value on it is a fraud. The Agriculture Department has many questions to answer about that particular issue. I know that Mr Elliott will work with the other members of the Agriculture Committee to seek those answers, and I thank him for bringing that issue to the Floor today.

We need to maximise the value of our assets. At present, the sale of those assets would not be of any benefit to the people of Northern Ireland.

There are many considerable projects that are of huge benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. I suggest to Mr McNarry that his colleagues would not be particularly happy with him if, for example, we were not to proceed with the redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital. I am sure that the good people of Strangford would reject Mr McNarry's idea to make those particular cuts. I am sure that his colleague Mr Gardiner would be less than happy if we did not proceed with developments at Craigavon Area Hospital.

I am sure that Mr McNarry's colleagues in Belfast would be less than happy if we did not proceed with the Belfast sewers project. I am sure that my Lagan Valley colleague Mr Basil McCrea would not want the £20 million project for the development of the South Eastern Regional College to be scrapped. Some of us worked very hard to secure that development.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for giving way. While he is on that theme, could he respond to the loss of the 6,000 potential jobs that would have been created by the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site? How does he feel about the loss of those construction jobs in his constituency?

Mr Poots: I will tell the Member exactly how I feel. Six thousand jobs are not enough. I have much higher expectations for the Maze development than a mere 6,000 jobs. I suggest that the deputy First Minister's office should tidy things up very quickly. If that was done, real developers could be brought in to develop that site very quickly. We will create substantially more than 6,000 jobs, and our economy will develop significantly, if we receive co-operation from that particular office.

Mr McNarry: How many jobs would the shrine have created?

Mr Poots: I hear the hatchet man talking again. He does not seem to like the fact that mention was made of his proposals to cut the development of the Ulster Hospital.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Poots: We will reject his proposals to cut the development of the Ulster Hospital.

Mr Wells: It is very hard to follow the barnstorming contribution from Mr Poots. I will be brief. A couple of issues have emerged that we, as an Assembly, should consider in the long term. I speak not as a representative of the Committee for Regional Development, but as someone who has sat on that Committee in this Assembly and in the first Assembly in 1999.

A theme that keeps coming back to bite the Committee — which the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott raised — is the vexed issue of the structural maintenance of roads. Unfortunately, a system has developed over the years in which structural maintenance has depended upon allocations in the monitoring rounds, and why that happened is obvious.

The very natures of the quarrying and road industries mean that contractors connect very quickly when money becomes available, and they fix roads at short notice. Therefore, it has become accepted that if the issue of structural maintenance is left to the monitoring rounds, the contractors will be ready, the tar will be hot, the engines will be revving, and they will go straight to a country road to fix it. The problem is that the wheels have come off the monitoring-round gravy train.

In the past four quarters, a consistent pattern has emerged, whereby the amount of available money has been reduced even further.

If ever the old grandmothers' phrase, "a stitch in time saves nine", was true, it is true about the structural maintenance of roads. We are reaching the stage at which some C-class roads in Northern Ireland undergo major repairs only once every 83 years. That means that many people in the Chamber will not be alive to see the one planned maintenance of some C-class roads in their areas. Those of us who do not drink or smoke, and who are vegetarians, have a greater chance of seeing it, but it may not happen for the rest. *[Laughter.]* Although I was making a humorous point, by using the present method for the structural maintenance of roads, we are storing up huge problems for our society.

I think that everyone in the Chamber will unite in congratulating the Minister for succeeding in bidding for large capital projects, and when they filter through the system, Northern Ireland's infrastructure will be radically changed. Already, dualling work has taken place on the main Dungannon to Ballygawley road; plans are well advanced for upgrading the Aghnacloy to Londonderry route, and that must be welcomed; and work on the Westlink is almost complete. All those projects will bring huge economic benefits to Northern Ireland.

However, there is little sense in having wonderful A-class trunk roads and motorways, if one encounters the reality of what has been happening when one drives into rural areas. I am not criticising any particular Department, because this state of affairs is a legacy of our history, but it is time that we had a fundamental review of our approach to the problem. The monitoring-round route will no longer suffice, and if we do not do something soon, some of our roads will simply collapse because of the lack of planned structural maintenance — or even a coating of stones.

We should have learned lessons from water. For years under direct rule, the water infrastructure was deprived of essential investment, and when the books were opened following devolution, they told an extremely sorry tale. We found that sewage treatment works throughout the country simply did not meet modern standards and, therefore, we have had to spend vast amounts of money to upgrade major sewage treatment works in places such as north Down, Portrush and east Antrim. Had we spent money at the time, as part of a sensible planned maintenance budget, we may well have avoided many of the huge problems that we have faced since devolution.

In the next couple of years, we must sit down and think strategically about what we intend to do about the problem. If we do not, as I said, we will cause enormous difficulties for future generations. It is no good passing on a totally decrepit road system, simply because we are not prepared to face up to the reality that we are not spending enough money. The last monitoring round was particularly disappointing, and if we continue spending at the present rate, there will not be enough money left in the kitty to carry out that work.

When the unemployment statistics were published recently, the headline figure was dramatic and worrying. However, it is interesting to note, and significant, that almost half the entire increase in unemployment in Northern Ireland was as a result of layoffs in the construction industry, and reviving that aspect of our economy, particularly road maintenance, is one way that we could quickly get people in Northern Ireland back to work. We could have men back on the roads within weeks. Other job-creation methods are much slower and longer term; however, in Northern Ireland, many thousands of capable road workers — mostly men — would be ready to start such work at the drop of a hat. Perhaps, we could kill two birds with one stone by bringing our roads up to an acceptable level and by —

Mr Shannon: Is that the first time that the Member has killed two birds?

Mr Wells: As someone who boasted about going to Argentina to kill 8,000 pigeons, that statement is a bit rum.

Mr Shannon: I did not boast about killing 8,000 pigeons; it was rumoured that I killed 8,000 birds.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member has not informed the House whether he killed more than 8,000 pigeons or fewer, but, if I was an Argentinian pigeon, I would be extremely worried if I saw him coming through Buenos Aires again.

We need to grapple with this problem. It is set in stone in the incoming Budget, but we need to get together as an Assembly and work out how to solve the problem in the long term. Should we regard planned maintenance as infrastructure, and access SIB funds? Is there some radical way that we can get this sorted out? If not, I predict that rural areas will face big problems in the future. In 10 or 15 years' time, we will look back and ask why we did not tackle the problem before it was too late.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for the Environment has considered the Department's submission for the February monitoring round, and it has a major concern that it has identified to the Minister. The Department of the Environment has identified road safety as an area in which it can seek reductions in its budget. The Committee has asked for more information on the detail. Proposals include a reduction in spend for road safety education officers, and members have been led to believe that that is due to a deliberate delay in recruitment to save money.

Members are concerned about the implications of that, especially since it concerns the safety of children. Should we be making any cuts or postponing spending in that area? Can we be confident that there will not be an increase in the numbers of children and young people dying on our roads or sustaining injuries, as a consequence of that money-saving exercise and decision?

When bidding for funds, the correlation between education officers and child safety is made by the Department. The converse, therefore, naturally suggests that reductions in that area will have a detrimental effect. The Committee was so concerned about the issue that it felt unable to endorse the submission to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The concerns did not stop there.

The Committee was also concerned about the ongoing problem to which it was alerted regarding the reduction in fees from planning applications and a further bid by the Department to fill the resultant gap. A similar proposal was presented to the Committee at the last monitoring round, and members are asking how long the public purse can be called upon to make up the difference in the shortfall.

Members also wanted to be informed of what the longer-term implications would be for personnel in the Planning Service if — or when — adjustments in budget forecasts have to be made to allow for that reduced demand.

The Committee for the Environment noted with consternation the discrepancy between what appears to be an overstuffed planning unit and a shortage of road safety education officers. The Committee sees that as something of a no-brainer.

Concerns about the February monitoring submission did not stop there. It seems that the Department is in a position to return over £500,000 as a result of a reduction in environmental protection spend and farming-conservation practices. Considering that agriculture schemes are so readily oversubscribed when administered by other Departments, members wanted to know why there seemed to be an inability to spend the money that was budgeted by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Were farmers unaware that the money was available to them? How were such schemes advertised? How were farmers advised of them? How were they delivered? Those are some key questions to which the Committee is seeking answers.

The Committee learned also that there had been slippage in the electronic planning information for citizens (e-PIC) project that had been so eagerly awaited. In previous monitoring submissions, that had been attributed to difficulties in recruitment. However, in this February monitoring round, the Committee was told that in its efforts to save money, the Department had sought deliberately to delay planned expenditure on filling vacancies where there had been no contractual obligations to pay in this financial year. We will have to wait for a while before the e-PIC project becomes fully and completely alive.

I reiterate the Committee's overriding concern that in a bid to save money in the short term, the Department is — and will be — putting children's lives at risk in the longer term.

As we come to the end of this budgetary period and make preparations for the next one, I urge the Department to ensure that any monetary sacrifices that are made now do not result in lives being sacrificed tomorrow.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, sin a bhfuil le rá agam.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; that is all that I have to say on behalf of the Committee.

4.45 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): I am pleased to speak in the debate. The Chairperson of the Committee spoke earlier and outlined a number of the issues that the Committee raised, but perhaps I can place a slightly different emphasis on some points.

Committee members noted the proposal that the Department for Employment and Learning made to DFP, and I have composed some brief remarks about the Department for Employment and Learning's reduced requirements. In this monitoring round, Committee

members noted that underspend for particular projects and programmes was not large. In fact, underspend appeared to be comparatively small-scale when one considered the total amount that was allocated to the Department. However, the percentage that the underspend represents in specific budgets for projects or programmes can be vital.

Committee members have already established that shortfalls in spending on demand-led programmes — skills and preparation-for-work programmes — are a result of problems associated with time lags, ahead of when involvement in those programmes became obligatory for eligible clients. The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned that point in her contribution.

As a case in point, in this monitoring round, the Department for Employment and Learning is confirming a reduced requirement of circa £700,000. That is because take-up of the New Deal/Steps to Work programme has not reached the levels that were forecast. The programme is not mandatory for those aged 18 to 24, and it is not possible for people in that age bracket to enter the programme before they have been registered for jobseeker's allowance for a minimum of six months. For those aged over 25, that period is 18 months. Committee members have previously queried the requirement for an 18-month qualifying period.

Given that the Committee has queried that time lag, and bearing in mind that the numbers of people who are out of work has shot up, it might be time for the Minister to give that matter consideration. There is every expectation that funding levels for that scheme and other demand-led skills-training programmes, which are directly related to the increasing levels of unemployment, will need to be increased. Committee members wish to draw that to Minister Dodds's attention, and we implore him to be accommodating with funding for those essential schemes when demand for them increases.

Committee members have emphasised to departmental officials the need for a highly skilled workforce and for investment in the upskilling and reskilling of all our young people, and, indeed, all those who need retraining. Failure to do that will mean that we are not ready for better economic times, when we shall need a well-qualified, motivated and highly skilled workforce, which will be attractive not only to foreign investors but to the most progressive of local firms, as they exploit business opportunities for growth.

Those skills gaps cannot be allowed to continue — they must be addressed. I believe that I am right in saying that Committee members will support bids that the Department submits for funds for such training programmes. We ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to bear that in mind when it comes to the

future upskilling and reskilling of the Northern Ireland labour force.

I will now take off my Deputy Chairperson's hat and speak as a member of the Committee. It is probably the case that the worst-hit sector of industry is the construction sector. Hundreds of apprentices have now been paid off and, as such, are unable to complete their apprenticeships. Unfortunately, the company fostering scheme that Minister Empey developed has not been taken up by the sector. We will lose those young people from our skilled workforce if they are not given the opportunity to gain their full apprenticeship qualifications. Members have expressed concerns on that matter, which the Minister must address. Funding will be required to deal with that.

Again, I implore the Finance Minister to consider funding for the increased quality of apprenticeship schemes overall. I have no doubt that when the Committee completes its work on the review of apprenticeship training, it will recommend a higher quality of apprenticeship training through every sector of industry.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has always taken a responsible position in its relationship with the Department, and it will, I believe, be supportive of the Department in its work over the coming months.

Mr Weir: I am, possibly, the last Member, other than the Minister, to speak in the debate. At this late stage in the afternoon, it is difficult to provide anything that is new, inspiring or interesting, so I shall try my best to stick to that promise and bring nothing that is new, inspiring or interesting to the debate. Indeed, a heckler on my right has said that that has never stopped me in the past.

Not only towards the end of a debate is it difficult to introduce anything new, to those who have been involved in Budget debates — and, along with several colleagues in the Chamber, I have been involved in some of the Budget or finance debates since about 1999 — there is a tremendous sense of *déjà vu* about the subject. Mr Wells, one of the previous Members to speak, was probably debating the subject when there were pounds, shillings and pence.

However, for those of us who have been involved in Budget processes over the past 10 years or so, there is often a great similarity in these debates. Despite our current financial position, I suspect that if one plucked this debate, or one of the other debates, at random at any stage over the past 10 years and said that it was today's debate, plenty of the same issues would be coming up again and again.

Not unsurprisingly, and with a fair level of merit, we heard representatives of the various Committees read the key demands of their Department, and it is perfectly

reasonable for Committee Chairpersons to defend their bailiwicks. One of the problems of any Finance Minister is that there is rarely a choice between good spend and bad spend, or between things that are completely unworthy and things that have a full degree of merit. Quite often, it is a choice between expenditure on various good projects. Therefore, the position of the various Committee Chairpersons is understandable.

However, we have seen a few novel actions today. As regards competing for priorities, we have seen the need to have everything focused on a business or a right-wing agenda, a need to have health as a top priority, and a need to have child poverty and tackling the poverty of the lowest in our society as a priority. Those competing priorities can be found in the speeches of simply the Ulster Unionist Party, who are still not quite sure on the one hand whether they are with the "Cameroons", who are willing to slash and burn everything, or whether they are in the Fred Cobain mode, trying to defend an old Labour-type agenda.

Unfortunately, we have also seen a high level of misunderstanding in the debate, particularly from the Ulster Unionist Benches. The debate is not about the future long-term direction of the Budget. There will be an opportunity tomorrow to debate the wider bits of the Budget and for the longer-term position to be examined. Today's debate, however, is about ensuring that money goes to front line services. When the tap gets turned off on public money, those Members who will oppose today's debate must tell us how they will explain that to all those front line services that have not been given enough money to survive physically, and I look forward to that.

Of course, we do not always have the calm, erudite presentation of an alternative way forward in the Budget debate, as was done by Mr McNarry, and today was no exception.

Instead, we got some "stuntery", whereby, at one stage, an attempt was made to table an amendment to leave 1p in the Consolidated Fund. Some of us with long memories will remember the great cry of the now Liberal Democrats in the 1980s for a 1p increase on income tax. Suddenly, there was a massive range of things that they could do with that 1p increase — it must have been spent several times over. That 1p increase was spent on education, health, and so on, yet even the now Liberal Democrats did not have the inventiveness to spend a single penny over and over again, à la Mr McNarry. We must acknowledge his inventiveness when it comes to fiscal responsibility.

I heard mention of the black hole. Not only do some Members seem obsessed with the world of finance but others have become amateur astronomers in their spare time, and they appear to be spotting black holes all over the place. Let us be honest: on inspection, the

argument does not hold up. Yes, there is an examination of wish lists of £1 billion in future expenditure. Again, I must point out that that matter is not directly relevant to today's business. To deal with the issue, a number of those wish lists relate to energy costs, job evaluation and departmental prioritisations, but that is not expenditure to which we have committed. Consequently, they are potential future pressures.

I am sure that if given enough money, all of us involved in drawing up the Budget could spend it on worthy causes two or three times over. However, that does not constitute a wish list. As everybody knows, we are living in tough financial circumstances. Those who seek a radical redistribution of the Budget are very quick to tell us where they think things are wrong and where they believe vast additional amounts of money should be spent, yet there is silence when they are asked to identify which programmes and departmental budgets are to be cut to finance those additional investments. For example, should £500 million be taken out of the health budget to fund those programmes? Again, when that question is asked, we are met with silence.

I will now speak about capital investment. Some £1.4 billion in net capital is projected to be spent. The difference between that projection and earlier projections is that it is net of capital receipts. Those who decry the £1.4 billion of capital investment should remember that that figure represents a record spend. It was only as recently as 2003 that the amount spent on capital receipts was £676 million, which is less than half the projected spend now. Indeed, last year, the figure was £1.1 billion. Again, what we are witnessing represents not simply an increase or a record level of expenditure but very much a step change and a sea change.

It is abundantly clear that all Departments must examine their budgets to ensure that their capital expenditure is right and that projects are not being unnecessarily delayed. In particular, those Departments with large capital projects must ensure that projects are being progressed as quickly as they should be. A distinction must be made between capital projects that have been put on the long finger and those that will be progressed in the next financial year — the delay of a month or two or into the next financial year is not a major problem.

It is important that the spring Supplementary Estimates fulfil the Executive's priorities of putting the economy and business first and of ensuring that front line services are delivered. I urge Members to think about what they are voting for in this debate. Moreover, I ask those who oppose the motion to consider whether they want to stop front line services being delivered to all our constituents. I support the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The debate has been wide-ranging. I was going to say that

it was a pleasure to sit through it all, but that might be gilding the lily a little. Many issues have been raised, although, as Peter Weir said, some were not always relevant to the Supply resolutions under discussion.

Some Members touched on the wider economic and Budget considerations that they felt were important to reflect upon and discuss. In the course of my closing remarks, I hope to try to address some of those issues. However, to understand that, a certain level of financial, or at least numerical, literacy will be required. Although that will rule out one or two Members, most of those who spoke will be able to follow the gist of the Budget procedure. I gave up long ago on certain Members having a rational approach to financial matters.

5.00 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton, confirmed that there has been appropriate consultation with the Committee on the spending plans outlined in the motions. The Supply resolutions and the Budget Bill provide legal authority for the expenditure of moneys for this year and for the first couple of months of 2010. Therefore, when we list the projects that would be stopped if they had their way, those Members who announced that they will vote against the motions will have to explain to everyone in their constituencies how such action will help with the restoration of economic confidence in Northern Ireland.

I will address one or two of the other crackpot schemes that were announced by Mr McNarry, who I think is the official finance spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. He mentioned freezing the pay of public-sector workers. That was slipped into his speech, and I will examine that in more detail shortly.

The House should be familiar with — although I know that some Members are not — the logistical need for the Budget Bill to have accelerated passage and to receive Royal Assent by 31 March 2009. I appreciate the assistance of the Committee in that matter. I assure Members that strict conditions have been applied to the headroom built into the Supplementary Estimates. Any resources allocated at this stage will be used only for the agreed purpose, and virement approval will not be given later to cover excess spending in any other areas.

Mr Hamilton raised the issue of the review of in-year monitoring. Although the most significant spending allocations to Northern Ireland Departments are made as part of the Budget process, it is equally important that there is sufficient flexibility to make changes subsequently as part of the in-year monitoring process. Although the current process has generally worked well, it is essential that we seek to continually improve all of our programmes and processes, which is why my Department is reviewing the in-year monitoring process. That review will examine in particular the

bureaucratic burden on Departments as well as how engagement with Committees can be improved. The review will be completed by the end of the financial year, and I look forward to the outcome of the Committee's deliberations on that matter.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Sue Ramsey, mentioned more funding for demand-led skills programmes. I agree with her and the deputy Chairperson of that Committee, Robin Newton, about the need to continue supporting the local economy and workers, particularly with regard to skills. As was mentioned, we need to be ready for the time when the upturn in the economy arrives. It is very difficult to predict the level of funding required for demand-led programmes, which is why the quarterly monitoring process is so important in providing the Executive with the flexibility to respond to those issues. Some people decry that process, but at the same time make pleas for extra resources to be freed up from money not spent elsewhere in the in-year monitoring process. The Department for Employment and Learning will want to monitor funding requirements for programmes as we move into the next financial year.

Sue Ramsey and Stephen Farry both mentioned capital projects. Given the nature of such schemes, there will always be some slippage in capital projects, which is another reason why we urge all Departments to identify slippage early in the year and surrender it as reduced requirements, thus enabling the resources to be reallocated. Any acceleration of capital projects is dependent on the level of resources available in that year. Again, that is basic financial common sense, which will be lost on one or two Members. However, I make that point for the benefit of most Members.

As part of the recent December monitoring round, the Executive agreed to avail of the opportunity provided by the Treasury in London to accelerate £9.4 million of capital investment from 2010-11 into the 2008-09 financial year. Representatives of the construction industry in particular welcomed that. If the Executive so decides, there is also an opportunity to accelerate £76 million into 2009-2010 from 2010-11. However, it must be borne in mind that we need to take all factors into account when making that decision and that acceleration of funding has implications in terms of the year in which it is being accelerated from. However, we will keep that matter under review.

Some Members raised the issues of Crossnacreevy and Workplace 2010. In the light of changed circumstances, the position in both cases is being reviewed before recommendations are made on how to proceed. Edwin Poots made the point about Crossnacreevy. It is important that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development takes that issue on board as a matter of priority. It is a matter essentially for that Department.

I will now turn to a number of other matters that were raised regarding the Executive's capital investment plans. As Peter Weir, Simon Hamilton and other Members pointed out, the Executive's plans regarding capital investment will be higher this year than they were last year. In fact, they will be double what they were under direct rule. Therefore, when we talk about ensuring that jobs are protected, particularly those in the construction industry, it is important to remember the level of investment this year and the level that is planned not only next year and the year after, but over the 10-year period of the investment strategy.

If we did not have that strategy in place, everyone would ask what we are doing to put more money into capital expenditure. References were made to what Scotland and Wales are doing, but, in proportion, Northern Ireland is doing what Scotland and Wales are doing. In fact, when I met the Finance Ministers for Scotland and Wales, we agreed on the commonality of our approach to investment in capital projects. In fact, we were going further with issues such as rates relief to help hard-pressed families. There was a large degree of commonality, for instance, on the issue of ensuring that Government receipts and invoices were paid as quickly as possible, in order to ensure that there was cash flow to industry and to businesses.

Given that Mr McNarry raised the issue of a review of budget allocations, it surprised me that he then opposed moves by the Executive to reprioritise funding to projects that will have the largest immediate impact on the economy. Another matter of concern, which I raised at the outset, was his suggestion about public-sector pay freezes. I am sure that the 200,000 public-sector workers in Northern Ireland, as well as shopkeepers and local firms who rely on those salaries for business, would have been shocked when they heard the suggestion from the official spokesman —

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, you have had your say. I am taking my opportunity now to reply.

Mr McNarry: Are you going to tell fibs?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: They will be shocked at his call for a public-sector wage freeze. *[Interruption.]*

You had plenty of time to speak, Mr McNarry. You will now be able to listen to my response.

Mr McNarry: But you are not telling it right.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Calm down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Does the Member not realise — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to withdraw his remark.

Mr McNarry: Whatever the remark was that gave offence to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I withdraw it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It has to be said that during a time of downturn in the private sector, public-sector wages provide essential support, and that a pay freeze would have serious consequences for the economy. I do not know whether the rest of the Member's party agree that hard-working public-sector workers and their families who have experienced rising costs over the past year should be faced or threatened with a further penalty at this time — *[Interruption.]*

The Member is getting all excited now, because we are dealing with some of the points that he made. We remember Mr McNasty — sorry, Mr McNarry — dubbed “the hatchet man” by my colleague, or “Slasher” McNarry, was at odds with Mr McCrea on this issue, and he was clearly at odds with Mr Cobain and Sir Reg Empey on this issue.

When Reg Empey was asked on ‘The Politics Show’ a week-and-a-half ago, he made it clear that there should be no fundamental reprioritisation of the Programme for Government — he defended it.

Mr McNarry was sacked by Reg Empey as Chief Whip. We know his views — he talked about policing and justice. He once said that it had to be recognised that there would be a Sinn Féin Minister for policing and justice. He went on to say that he did not understand the use of the word “easement”, as though it was a new invention that we rely on. Then Mr Cobain spoke, and he talked freely about easements, so he knew all about easements and reduced requirements. However, to Mr McNarry, it appeared to be a new concept. He really does need to get a bit of financial literacy into his head. The black hole that is in his imagination needs to be filled with a bit of financial accounting understanding.

Just before Christmas, Mr McNarry came out with a brilliant suggestion. He has never since repeated it in this House, or anywhere else. He came out with the idea that we should have what he called an “equity release scheme”. In this brilliant crackpot scheme, he said that we should tot up all that the Executive and Government hold in valuations of assets in Northern Ireland. We should then seek from the UK Government an immediate interest-free advance. Later, if the valuations rose, we would repay the loan and pocket the rest. It was laughed to scorn in Treasury, and I have not heard it mentioned since. What has happened to that idea? Has it disappeared into the black hole? We have never heard him mention it since, yet it was put forward as a means of trying to rescue our economy. That is the level of financial literacy that was on display.

Then Mr McNarry was going to table an amendment to knock a penny off the Budget. That was his solution.

His amendment was not even accepted. It beggars belief that, at a time of serious economic consequences, Mr McNarry should make such a ludicrous, pathetic, laughable suggestion, instead of making serious suggestions.

Mr McNarry said that we rely on the hope that there will be inefficiencies in the system, in order to meet pressures and so on. He should have a word with his colleague Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning. If Mr McNarry believes that reduced requirements are inefficiencies, then Reg is one of the most inefficient Ministers. The fact is, however, that reduced requirements come about because of the exact opposite of inefficiency. Very often, there are reduced requirements from Departments because they have been more efficient than they would have been otherwise. Sometimes, that is because Departments have overbid for funds in the first place. Sometimes, it is because of changed circumstances and money cannot be spent as originally intended and must be returned. That happens in all Departments. However, to Mr McNarry, this is mind-boggling stuff, unknown to him — though it is known to all the other Chairpersons and representatives of his party.

Mr McNarry's view runs totally contrary to what his colleague Mr Beggs said when a statement was made about the December monitoring round. Mr Beggs said that in extending the level of overcommitment and then dealing with it through the in-year monitoring process, the Minister:

“will be implementing one of the ideas that was suggested by the Ulster Unionist Party in its submission on the draft Budget”. — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p115, col 2].*

So, Mr McNarry is at odds with his party colleague Mr Beggs on that very issue.

The other issue that has to be dealt with is the proposal to reprioritise the Budget. It has been acknowledged by several Members — and I have acknowledged it as well — that during the in-year monitoring process, changes are made to the Budget. Additional funds are put in various areas in response to bids. For example, the fuel-credit payment is a change to the Budget. Mr Durkan acknowledged that we make changes as we go along; of course we do. However, what is suggested by those who put forward the idea of reprioritisation is that we have a fundamental look at what is in the baseline allocation of each Department.

5.15 pm

That can only mean taking money out of one Department and putting it into another. That is a fundamental attack on budgets such as that of the Health Department and the Education Department. There is no other way to find the money to fundamentally reprioritise than through reallocation among Departments. Do Mr McNarry and others who put forward that

suggestion live in a parallel universe? They need to get it into their heads that the Budget has been fully allocated along departmental baselines.

Almost half of the Budget goes to the Health Department. Has Mr McNarry asked his colleague the Health Minister whether he is prepared to give up any of that money? Mr McGimpsey has made it clear, in the Executive and elsewhere, that he wants more money. I have listened to representatives of the various Committees say that they want more money. Once again, Mr McNarry is clearly at odds with his party colleagues and with other Assembly Members.

Apart from his crackpot idea of mortgaging Government assets — including, no doubt, this Building — to try to secure an interest-free loan from the Treasury, Mr McNarry is silent. Importantly, Basil McCrea made the point that the threat emanates from Whitehall. In his pre-Budget report, the Chancellor of the Exchequer signalled that there could be £5 million of so-called efficiencies; the difference is that he does not intend to plough those back into spending. I have spoken to my Welsh and Scottish counterparts and we intend to resist that; we have made it clear that we will raise that matter with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. When I challenged Mr McCrea, he agreed that we should oppose that. However, when I challenged him to oppose what his own party — the Conservatives — will be doing, with cuts that go further than Labour's and that will begin in April 2010, there was silence.

Mr McNarry talked about a black hole in the Budget. That black hole will be created by Whitehall changing the allocations under the block grant. Mr McNarry's new leader, David Cameron, is proposing even greater cuts to the Northern Ireland block grant than Labour, and both proposals are unacceptable. Will Mr McNarry and his party oppose those cuts? It is very clear that they are in bed with those who are going to lead an even greater attack on services than anything that he could even imagine. Mr McNarry has nothing to say because, unless he decides to renege, he is part and parcel of that attack. He is at odds with his party.

Mr McNarry has spoken up and railed against those who urge a full-scale line-up with the Tories' views on the Orange Order, etc, and that has caused him some difficulty. However, as financial spokesman, Mr McNarry will have to answer a question: does he agree with the Conservative Party attack on funding in the block grant — an attack that will go even further than the Labour Party proposals? Both proposals are unacceptable and will be opposed by my party and, I hope, by all parties in the Executive.

As far as financial literacy is concerned, I do not hold out any hope whatsoever that Mr McNarry will learn anything as a result of the debate; however, I hope that

other Members in his party, particularly his party leader, will be aware of the inconsistencies in his approach.

I wish to deal very quickly with a number of matters that Declan O'Loan raised. Mr O'Loan talked about funding for PFI projects coming from the banking sector and from PPPs; however, as Mr O'Loan knows, PFI deals account for less than 25% of the total investment strategy for Northern Ireland. If there are specific problems in PPP delivery, we will look at alternative methods of ensuring that contracts are fulfilled. That could include working with alternative banking consortia or delivery through conventional procurement vehicles.

Mr O'Loan was concerned that the £900 million was not new money; however, at no point have I said that it was.

However, in minimising the impact of the additional cost pressures that face the Executive, the package of support that is provided by the Treasury is of equal value to the funds that are available for local public services. That included £800 million to cover the deferment of water charges and £100 million for wider pressures, including equal pay. If that support had not been forthcoming, the Executive would have been faced with the option of addressing those pressures from a reduction in existing departmental budgets. That money was secured to ensure that that would not have to happen.

Stephen Farry and Iris Robinson raised issues on the approach that some Members have taken to the Budget Bill. The suggestion that some Members would go through the Lobbies to vote against the Supplementary Estimates and the Budget Bill is incredible. I will be clear on what a vote against those would do. The Members who talk about a black hole in the Budget would immediately create an unimaginable abyss, because no funding would be available for any front line services anywhere in Northern Ireland from 1 April 2009. Those Members have put that forward as responsible economic policy at a time of economic recession and hardship. That is the level of responsibility from certain quarters.

I note the criticisms that the Alliance Party and the SDLP made and the issues that they took, but at least they have the responsibility to realise that such a crazy approach would be totally detrimental to the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. I leave it to the Ulster Unionist Party to decide whether it is prepared to be led by Mr McNarry in that way or whether it intends to assert some degree of financial responsibility after all.

Mr Farry mentioned the shortfall in capital expenditure. It is, of course, the primary responsibility of Ministers and Departments, working with the Strategic Investment Board, to implement the Executive's capital investment programme, rather than that of the Department of

Finance and Personnel. However, it must be recognised that, as house prices have fallen, external factors have meant that delivery against the £1.8 billion in gross capital expenditure plans is no longer a meaningful indicator of performance by Departments.

As Simon Hamilton, Peter Weir and others have pointed out, the net capital expenditure plans of £1.3 billion, which Northern Ireland Departments will not only meet but will exceed comfortably according to the latest forecast, is a better measure. That compares with last year, when Departments underspent by some £300 million against net capital investment plans.

It is important to put on record the level of expenditure and the sorts of projects that are being funded as a result of the investment strategy and the capital investment that is being made this year. Seven major projects are being funded in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, totalling some £265 million. That includes developments at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, the Downe Hospital, Portadown Community Treatment and Care Centre, Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the regional adolescent child psychiatric unit. That is only a number of the projects that are taking place in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Roads Service has spent some £125 million on the Westlink and the widening of the M2. The A4 from Dungannon to Ballygawley has received £115 million of investment. At Newry, the A1 has received £180 million. Northern Ireland Water has received £127 million to spend on the Belfast sewer project, and Northern Ireland Water has 10 waste-water treatment projects under construction with an aggregated value of approximately £89 million. I could go on to list the projects that are being carried out by the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development, and so on.

All that points to the fact that a considerable amount of investment is being made in capital expenditure this year. That is expected to grow next year and extend into the following year, 2010-11. It is essential that those projects proceed and are not derailed in any way. Therefore, in December 2008, I announced that any projects that were using the frameworks that were being held up by legal challenges will move forward by conventional procurement. I said that that would allow £115 million worth of projects to go to the market. Between December and 1 April, capital projects worth £400 million will go to market.

When we talk about what is happening elsewhere, about fiscal stimuli and all the rest, it must be recognised that £18 billion worth of investment — over the period of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland — represents a significant boost to our construction industry,

and lays the groundwork and foundation for a modern infrastructure for the people of Northern Ireland in the years ahead. Capital expenditure is projected to be some 26.4% higher than last year, providing a significant benefit to the construction industry and the delivery of better public services as part of the Programme for Government.

Stephen Farry raised a point about the current economic downturn. As was pointed out by other Members — including Ian Paisley Jnr — the economy was, and continues to be, the first priority of the Programme for Government. Sir Reg Empey was right to say that no fundamental reprioritisation or review is required, because the Programme for Government has it right.

I know that Sir Reg is away, but he might be surprised to hear what was said by some Members from his own Benches. In an economic downturn, growing the economy must be put first, which is what the Programme for Government does. As I have said, that is consistent with the approach of devolved Administrations elsewhere. I will continue to work with colleagues in the coming months to explore every possible opportunity, and to provide as much support as possible to struggling families and hard-pressed businesses, as the precise impact of the economic downturn continues to unravel.

I believe that the Budget puts in place a strong foundation of support for families and businesses in Northern Ireland over the next three years. That support includes the decision to freeze domestic regional rates over the Budget period, which marks a clear break from direct rule when rates bills increased by an annual average of around 10%.

Over the past six months, further measures were put in place to support local families. In December, I announced a package of measures in response to the economic downturn, including the £150 fuel credit payment; and £20 million for the farm nutrient management scheme, which — as Tom Elliott and other Members pointed out — has proved extremely useful by benefiting the agricultural sector and providing valuable work for construction firms. Help has also been given to schools, roads maintenance and public transport works.

Measures that we announced about the small business rates relief scheme, on which further details will be forthcoming shortly and which will come into play from 2010, have been widely welcomed by businesses, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises. The decision to freeze interest rates for businesses will also help them at this difficult time. It is essential that we do everything in our power, within our limited remit, to protect as many jobs as possible, and to help businesses. We brought forward measures to help councils in relation to rates relief, and introduced planning reforms. I am delighted that planning changes to PPS 21 announced

by the Minister, and other planning reforms, will speed up the planning process.

The issues of increased efficiency savings and the risk of Departments not achieving targets were raised. I believe that Mr Basil McCrea spoke about the £5 billion in 2010-11 that was mentioned in the Chancellor's pre-Budget report. I already referred to that in challenging other Members in Mr McCrea's party to recognise that the threat comes not so much from within the Assembly Budget than from outside with regard to what the Treasury plans to do to the block grant if it proceeds with the £5 billion in efficiency savings for Whitehall Departments for 2010-11 — and what the Conservative Opposition plans to do to make that situation even worse. We intend to challenge that, and I hope that we will have the support of all parties.

A number of other matters were raised. Mr Durkan questioned the delay in investment-delivery plans. We must focus on what is important, which is that Departments deliver their planned capital investment programmes. The latest forecast outturn figures from Departments for this year indicate almost full spend on net capital investment, which demonstrates that Departments are delivering on their capital programmes.

5.30 pm

Mr McElduff raised the issue of the multi-sports stadium. I must remind him and other Members that the accounting officers in both OFMDFM and DCAL concluded, as he well knows, that a value-for-money case had not been demonstrated for the scale of public expenditure that was involved in those proposals.

Transfer of fiscal powers was also raised in the debate. In order to consider the case for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly to have greater fiscal power, people who espouse such a view must first set out clearly what they want to do with that power. Would they raise taxes and thus place further burdens on local families and businesses? Would they reduce taxation and thus starve public services of funding? The simple fact is that Northern Ireland benefits significantly by billions of pounds each year from being part of a fiscal union with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the case now more than ever, as the experience of smaller nations throughout Europe has shown.

I accept the point that has been made by several Members about the challenging times to come in the years ahead. One of the strategic stocktake's aims was to highlight all of the pressures that are faced by the Executive. I have been clear and open about our financial position. The debate has emphasised external factors — and one of its benefits has been the acceptance of them by several Members — particularly the threat that is posed to the Executive as a result of the announcement in the pre-Budget report of Whitehall

efficiencies. We must take close recognition of that matter and challenge it at every opportunity. I look forward to working with parties and Members on those issues in a reasonable and mature way.

Mr Durkan raised the matter of reshaping economic policy. The fact is that, throughout the world, there is no clear agreement on the correct approach to economic interventions. He mentioned the ongoing review by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, chaired by Professor Richard Barnett of the University of Ulster, which will be important in setting the longer-term economic development strategy. I agree that the Government's role is to support local businesses and not to try to control the economy. That must be considered with regard to the Executive's role at this time.

The detrimental impact of rising unemployment on individuals and their families and the threat of job losses have been stressed during the debate. There was some suggestion that Invest Northern Ireland's approach to foreign direct investment (FDI) should be reconsidered. It must be ensured that local, indigenous firms have long-term growth. As Members are aware, the immediate need for job creation must often be focused on FDI from larger firms.

The Bain Review was also mentioned — it was debated on 21 October 2008 — and I am currently considering its consequences. The matter will be brought to the Executive for discussion in the near future.

The Chairperson of the Health Committee, Iris Robinson, mentioned the first call on savings by that Department. It was provided with the dispensation as part of the 2007 Budget process: it would receive the first £20 million in allocations as part of the in-year monitoring process. To date, £15 million has already been allocated to the Department during the current year. I am sure that the Health Minister would be extremely interested to hear members of his own party talk about reprioritisation of the Budget when the clear implications of that for departmental baselines is that that money would have to come largely out of the health budget.

As regards structural maintenance, several Members raised the issue of continued maintenance of the roads network. That is important, not only to sustain the quality of that important element of the public infrastructure, but also for the support that it offers the local construction industry. It is for that reason that the Executive agreed an additional allocation for structural maintenance as part of the 2008-09 in-year monitoring process. Going further, the structural-maintenance budget will increase by 28.6% in 2009-2010, while the overall roads capital-investment programme will be 77.5% greater than in 2007-08.

Of course, that will only be the case if Members decide not to reprioritise and take money out of that Department to put it into another Department. However, none of the Members who talked about the issue suggested where the money should be taken from.

Mr Simpson, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, raised the issue of the shortfall in capital receipts from house and land sales and the impact on the housing programme. We are fully aware of the pressures facing the housing budget due to the shortfall in house and land sale receipts. The additional allocation of £20 million during the 2008-09 in-year monitoring process is evidence that we recognise those pressures.

It must be recognised that a number of Departments face pressure. The Chairpersons of the various Committees — for Employment and Learning, Education and so on — all said that the needs of their Departments must be recognised in the allocation of any available in-year funds. Bearing in mind all the competing bids, it is important that all those matters are considered by the Executive as a whole. However, ensuring that jobs are maintained and created in the construction industry in Northern Ireland remains a priority.

I am pleased that the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association was allocated £15 million grant funding this year. Added to external finance, that sum will be sufficient to ensure that the target of 500 applicants can be met. I am sorry that I do not have time to deal with all the issues that were raised during this wide-ranging debate.

Tom Elliott spoke about the farm nutrient management scheme. I re-emphasise that there is no link between the sale of the Crossnacreevy site and the availability of funding for the farm nutrient management scheme. Any shortfall in funds that results from the sale of land at Crossnacreevy will impact on the Department's budget for 2010-11, but the farm nutrient management scheme is an issue for 2008-09. The importance that we place on the farm nutrient management scheme was indicated by the £20 million allocation that was made in December. Our ability to respond to any request for additional funding is entirely reliant on the level of resources at our disposal.

Dominic Bradley talked about the pressures in education. The pressures that have been identified in the Department of Education, and the other Departments, all need to be assessed carefully. For example, one bid related to £18 million in energy costs. However, that must be questioned in the light of the dramatic fall in the price of crude oil. I welcome Mr Bradley's view that the Department must look first to its own £2 billion budget and the 6% increase in funding that will be available next year.

Mr Neeson raised the issue of the green economy. It is important that local firms are encouraged to take advantage of all possible growth opportunities — including those relating to sustainability — but that must be based on business potential. Local firms know their own businesses better than civil servants do, and we should not tell them where or how to invest.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr McGlone, talked about the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland. The funding mechanism of road safety committees has been amended following a recent review, but that funding is not being cut. Instead, funding will be directed away from central administration and into front line road-safety activities that will be carried out by local committees.

Robin Newton raised the issue of the economic downturn's impact on apprenticeships. I welcome the actions that are being taken by the Department of Employment and Learning to allow apprentices to complete their training. However, I share Mr Newton's disappointment about the number of apprentices, who were training under the apprenticeship programme, who have been made redundant in 2008.

This has been an important debate. I thank Members for their contributions; some of them have been enlightening, and others have not been so enlightening. I also thank Members for the contribution that they make through the Committees, correspondence and questions posed in the Assembly and on other occasions. It is important that we debate such matters and that we deal robustly with views that clearly fall short of the challenges of the times.

In that respect, some Members' suggestions are out of kilter with financial reality. Most Members appreciate the basic concepts of budgeting and balancing the books. Other Members do not. I question the level of financial responsibility of Members who request additional spending without any clear steer as to the source of that funding.

The Executive and the Assembly carry a heavy responsibility to manage public expenditure in Northern Ireland prudently on the behalf of taxpayers. We must face future challenges with finite resources, and, therefore, it is essential that the Assembly passes the resolutions. Members who vote against the resolutions will, in effect, vote to remove Departments' authority and ability to spend money. That is unthinkable in the current difficult economic times. Indeed, it is, in any circumstances, unthinkable to prevent hospitals, schools, housing and other areas from receiving the public money that they require in order to provide front line services for families and businesses. I question the financial responsibility and political maturity of any

Member who votes against such a proposition. I commend the resolutions to the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Questions are put, I remind Members that the votes on the motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £12,485,717,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,730,008,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,618,965,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £7,078,596,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2009-10 document that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA 5/08], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2009 and 2010; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31st March 2009 and 2010; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2009.

5.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That constitutes the Bill's First Stage, and it shall now be printed.

I inform Members that the Speaker has received written notification from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Committee is satisfied that, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), appropriate consultation has taken place with the Committee on the public-expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can therefore proceed under the accelerated-passage procedure. The Second Stage of the Bill will be brought before the House tomorrow, Tuesday 17 February 2009.

Adjourned at 5.46 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 17 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Mr Barry McElduff has sought leave to make a personal statement in relation to a report by the Committee on Standards and Privileges on a complaint by Mr Thomas Buchanan.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Members will know that I am strongly opposed to the imposition of British symbols and emblems in this or any other part of Ireland. Tá a fhios ag Comhaltaí an Tionóil an méid seo. However, if a handful of words that I used in August 2008 broke the public duty for Members, as set out in the code of conduct for Members, which now appears to be the case, then, of course, I want to apologise for that. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Plenary Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the seventh meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format, which was held at the University of Ulster at Magee on Friday 23 January 2009.

All Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have approved this report that we make on their behalf. The Executive delegation was led by the First Minister and me, and we jointly chaired the meeting.

In addition to the First Minister, junior Ministers Donaldson and Kelly and myself, our delegation comprised the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Minister for Regional Development, and the Minister for Social Development.

The Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD, led the Irish Government delegation, which comprised Mary Coughlan TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Brian Lenihan TD, Minister for Finance; Mary Harney TD, Minister for Health and Children; Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for Transport; Michéal Martin TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Martin Cullen TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism; Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Social and Family Affairs; Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and Batt O'Keefe TD, Minister for Education and Science.

The meeting was held in the University of Ulster at Magee, and the vice chancellor, Professor Richard Barnett, and the pro vice chancellor and provost of Magee, Professor Jim Allen, along with their staff and student representatives, afforded us an excellent welcome and provided highly professional arrangements, facilities and hospitality. The Mayor of Derry also formally met the delegations.

During the meeting, we had a broad discussion with the Taoiseach and Irish Government Ministers about

the common economic challenges that we face, including the need for continuing practical and mutually beneficial North/South co-operation to assist in our efforts to deal with the economic downturn.

We outlined the steps that we are taking here in the package of measures that we have put in place, including the fuel credit fund. We highlighted the problem of access to credit from the banks and the increased incidence of loan-sharking and illegal moneylending — particularly in disadvantaged areas. We outlined our efforts to press local banks to improve the flow of credit to business.

The Taoiseach outlined the steps that the Irish Government are taking, particularly on infrastructure, innovation and with the main Irish banks. The Irish Government's Finance Minister, Brian Lenihan, outlined the specific problems relating to the Irish banking sector. He agreed to pass on to the six main Irish banks our concerns about access to credit here.

We also discussed the recent animal feed contamination incident that had a serious impact on farmers and food processors in both jurisdictions. We outlined the serious impact that this matter has caused, and pressed for an all-Ireland approach to resolving the difficulties. The Council noted the concerns that we raised on the matter and noted that the relevant Ministers have been engaged in intensive discussions about direct and indirect assistance. The Council requested that those Ministers continue to treat that as a matter of urgency.

The Council received a progress report prepared by the NSMC joint secretaries on the 14 NSMC ministerial meetings that have been held since the previous plenary in February 2008. The Council welcomed the mutually beneficial co-operation taken forward at those meetings.

The Council welcomed the good progress on the A5 north-west gateway to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast to Larne projects and the fact that the first key milestones were achieved ahead of target in autumn 2008. It noted that Ministers have agreed to intensify work on the bilateral agreement on the EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications and the mutual recognition of penalty points.

The Council noted the involvement of Ministers in the successful launch of the Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes. The Council also noted the intensification of co-operation on child protection, including a cross-border awareness campaign. Ministers noted the development of a 10-point all-island action plan on suicide prevention.

The Council noted the progress that has been made on the removal of waste that has been illegally dumped. It also noted the official opening of the new

Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen, which was completed on schedule and within budget.

It welcomed the progress that has been made in addressing educational underachievement, co-operation on Traveller education, and special education, including the services that the Middletown Centre for Autism provides. Progress on a draft all-island animal health and welfare strategy was also welcomed.

Ministers noted the work on the transfer of pensions on a cross-border basis and on cross-border banking issues, including the publication of information on the cost of personal cross-border banking transactions on the mobility website, all of which are of direct relevance to greater cross-border mobility. They also noted the success, to date, of the cross-border mobility website.

The Council welcomed progress to date by the group undertaking the St Andrews Agreement review. It noted that the experts/advisers have completed their report on efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd. The Council requested that the review group, in consultation with the relevant sponsor Departments and Ministers, should consider the recommendations made by the experts/advisers and submit a report to the next plenary meeting. The Council requested that the review group should complete work on its remaining terms of reference and submit proposals to a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format before the end of 2009.

The Council considered a paper on a North/South consultative forum. It noted the Irish Government's proposal on the role, format, membership and operation of a North/South consultative forum, and also noted the progress that has been made in reviewing the Civic Forum here. It agreed to consider the matter once that review is complete.

Ministers also considered a paper on a North/South parliamentary forum. They noted the ongoing discussions between the Houses of the Oireachtas and this Assembly, and the agreement to establish two working groups to develop proposals for such a body. The Council agreed to keep that matter under review.

The Council also considered a paper on future NSMC meetings. It approved a schedule of NSMC meetings to take place over the coming months and agreed that its next meeting in plenary format will be hosted by the Irish Government in June 2009. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement. He covered a vast number of issues. I have a lot of questions, but I know that we are restricted in the number that we are allowed to ask.

My first question is about child protection. Obviously, it is an issue in which all of us in this

Chamber are particularly interested. Will the Minister enlighten us with more detail about what co-operation on a cross-border child-protection campaign will mean? Will it mean that predators and those who seek out young children will be monitored and that young children will be protected? That is a major issue.

The deputy First Minister also referred to the Middletown Centre for Autism. I know that he is aware that those in the Province who have autistic children have great need of such a centre. Will he clarify whether the facilities and services in Middletown will be available to the entire Province, rather than just to that particular area? Will any help be provided to those who wish to avail themselves of those facilities?

Those are my two questions. I would love to ask a lot more, but I appreciate that I am restricted.

The deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his questions — they are always very positive and constructive. Safeguarding children is a high priority for the Executive. We established a ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which has identified safeguarding — including support for parents, families and carers — as one of its six key priorities.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has developed a cross-departmental safeguarding policy statement, which will shortly go to the Executive for approval. It binds together and integrates current developments and existing measures around safeguarding children, as well as examining what additional actions and policies are required.

Policy responsibility for sex-offender management rests with the NIO and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). They lead on child protection, but we do all that we can to ensure that robust arrangements are in place to safeguard vulnerable children.

We have been advised by Minister McGimpsey that as a result of discussions at the North/South Ministerial Council, Ministers have agreed a work programme to intensify co-operation on child protection, which I know Mr Shannon will welcome. We very much welcome the progress that has been made and acknowledge the work of the two Departments and all those involved in that process.

We understand that future work plans will include consideration of how best to raise awareness of issues, such as problems that are associated with the Internet and social networking. They will also identify the recommendations from the Byron Report that could have a North/South application. In addition, the future work plans will include consideration of the production of generic, cross-border information — using a variety

of media — that deals with such issues as the reporting of abuse, safe parenting and good-employment practice.

We also noted that the two Departments wish to examine current procedures for sharing information and to evaluate whether we can improve those, especially in relation to children who are thought to be at risk and at-risk families who move between the two jurisdictions. That work will also consider how best to take account of the movement of vulnerable families and children around Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

10.45 am

The Middletown Centre for Autism is intended as a facility for the entire island, not just for people with children with autism in the immediate vicinity. It is designed to be a centre of excellence, so that children and parents from all over the island will be able to come for first-class treatment — it will exclude nobody.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He mentioned the north-west gateway initiative. In the context of progress made, what knowledge, if any, did the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have about the decision to locate the Project Kelvin tele-house in Coleraine, rather than in Derry, which was the location that was originally identified in the INTERREG IVa application — which the deputy First minister mentioned in his statement — the state-aid document, and the instruction-to-tender document?

Mr Speaker: The questions must address the deputy First Minister's statement. Sometimes questions grow legs, and this question appears to have grown legs. Therefore, we will move on.

Mr Elliott: I hope that my question does not grow any further bodies. I thank the First Ministers for their statement.

The deputy First Minister mentioned the issue of contaminated feed. Does he believe that the Republic of Ireland Government's delay in informing the Northern Ireland authorities about the issue and their failure to provide a compensation package for those affected in Northern Ireland has damaged the good relations that existed between the two countries?

The deputy First Minister: As we are all aware, the situation has caused serious difficulties for farmers on both sides of the border, and the implications of it continue to evolve. Our Departments are working together to arrange a livestock cull and the appropriate disposal of animal carcasses and contaminated feed.

It has been alleged that a company based in the North is implicated in the contamination of feedstuffs, and the Environment Agency is carrying out a thorough sampling and audit of the premises concerned. Presently, there is no firm evidence to identify those premises as the source of the contamination. Officials from the

Environment Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Garda Síochána are in regular contact about the situation, and investigations are ongoing on both sides of the border.

On 28 November 2008, following routine sampling of pork fat, the Irish authorities became aware of the presence of non-dioxin-like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) in pork, and they immediately undertook an intensive investigation, which determined that the source of contamination was a feed ingredient. On 6 December 2008, the presence of dioxins in pork fat was confirmed, and on 5 December 2008, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) was advised by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that potentially infected material had been supplied to some farms here. As a precaution, DARD immediately placed restrictions on all animals in affected premises.

This matter has been a source of tremendous concern, and as many Members will know, last week, the First Minister and I, accompanied by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, visited Brussels to meet Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel. As a result of what I hope will be a successful outcome of that meeting, and decisions taken by the Executive on the following Thursday, we hope to address the concerns to the satisfaction of all those affected by this terrible situation in a way that will make progress and put this regrettable incident behind us.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement, and I look forward to the NSMC meeting in June and to many more thereafter.

I refer the deputy First Minister to the review of North/South bodies. Can he confirm that the first part of the review of the North/South implementation bodies finished its work in February 2008? Independent of that, is he in a position to publish that report? If so, when will it be published? If not, why not? Why can the people who live in the North and the South not be informed of the conclusions reached by the review of the existing North/South implementation bodies?

Does he agree that if the review of existing North/South bodies was positive, it is not a good template on which to build the second phase of the developing and deepening North/South arrangements?

The deputy First Minister: The St Andrews Agreement provided for a review group to report, with recommendations, to the North/South Ministerial Council. The review group's remit was to examine objectively the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies; to examine objectively the case for additional bodies in areas of co-operation within the North/South Ministerial Council where mutual benefit would be derived; and to input into the

work on the identification of a suitable substitute for the proposed lights agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

The review group consists of senior officials and an advisory panel of four experts/advisers — two appointed by the Executive and two appointed by the Irish Government. In connection with the examination of the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies, the experts/advisers — on behalf of the review group — conducted consultation meetings with each of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, their stakeholders, sponsor Departments and the social partners.

Ministers at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting in Derry on 26 January 2009 noted that the experts/advisers had completed their report on efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd. The review group, in consultation with the relevant sponsor Departments, will consider the recommendations made by the experts and submit a report to the next meeting of the plenary.

It would not be appropriate to release the advisory panel's report until the North/South Ministerial Council has considered the report from the review group. The review group will complete work on its remaining terms of reference and will submit proposals to a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format before the end of 2009.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the apparent signs of significant progress on positive and constructive engagement. However, I note that a number of references were made to projects that have been completed on time or within budget. That leads one to believe that those that are not so highlighted might not be on time or within budget.

The Minister talked about intensifying work on the bilateral agreement on the EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications and penalty points. That topic has been around since the days of the first Assembly. Road safety is a serious issue in the border regions, and there is a major need to get work done on that without requiring full EU agreement. Can the Minister provide a reassurance that that is happening?

The deputy First Minister also spoke about such infrastructure projects as improvements to the A5 and the A8. Given the economic downturn, particularly in the Republic, has he received reassurance that southern funding will continue on those major projects?

The deputy First Minister: All Members will be encouraged to note that the figures for road deaths reduced greatly last year; 2008 saw the lowest number of road deaths, in both jurisdictions, since records began. However, it is important that there should be no

let-up in our efforts to reduce the appalling human and economic costs of road casualties.

Following a meeting in June 2008 between the responsible Ministers from Dublin, Belfast and London, which resulted in an intensification of work on implementation of the relevant EU directive, the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the UK and Ireland is on target for completion by spring 2009.

Work is also continuing on the mutual recognition of penalty points. Ministers, North and South, have agreed to prioritise key issues such as drink-driving limits, road-safety strategies and cross-border enforcement. In December 2008, an evaluation of the Steering to Safety project was carried out under the umbrella of the co-operation and working together initiative. That evaluation demonstrated that the project had led to improved co-operation between the relevant authorities on both sides of the border and increased the understanding of the problem of road-traffic collisions in border areas and the actions needed to address it.

Co-operation between the authorities is continuing on advertising and publicity. For instance, the costs of new radio and television advertisements and the road-safety campaign that was undertaken in association with Rally Ireland, which ran from 29 January to 1 February, are being shared.

It is clear that very important work is taking place between Departments, North and South, and that is resulting in improved figures. We cannot rest on our laurels; we have to continue to explore the issue and examine how we can up our game in order to combat the unacceptably high levels of road deaths.

We have had a number of discussions with representatives of the Government in Dublin about the projects that Mr Ford mentioned. At one of those meetings, I raised my concern about the establishment of what is called An Bord Snip in the South, which has led people to expect all sorts of massive cuts. A process is taking place in the South that involves the Government, the unions and the business community, and that is playing itself out in the media. However, in the course of those conversations, I was assured — particularly about the road network from Monaghan through to the north-west area that includes Donegal and Derry, and the road from Belfast to Larne — that the money for those projects was ring-fenced and absolutely guaranteed. I take great satisfaction from that.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the joint First Minister for his statement. There are persistent rumours that two Irish banks are going to fail, that that is going to put increasing pressure on the Irish Government, and that the Irish Government themselves may default on their loans. Will he tell us whether he had any discussions

with the Irish Government about that? What advice would he give to exporters in Northern Ireland who are faced with the economic uncertainty in the South?

The deputy First Minister: We all understand that we are dealing with a phenomenal situation that is having a worldwide effect. During our visit to Brussels last week, the First Minister and I were told by leading officials that, for example, they believed that unemployment figures in Spain would rise to 20% by the end of this year. That is absolutely incredible. When we consider that our unemployment figures are at 5% and that unemployment levels in the South are at 9% and are galloping ahead, it is clear that we are dealing with a very difficult situation.

In recent times, there has been much discussion about how financial institutions are responsible for the difficulties that world economies are facing. We all know that every time that we turn on the RTÉ news, the first item on the agenda is the banking situation and the holding to account of leading bankers.

On 12 February 2009, Brian Lenihan announced that he was providing a further €7 billion to the recapitalisation fund for the AIB and the Bank of Ireland. In December, the Irish Government provided €5.5 billion to recapitalise the banks. In January 2009, the Anglo Irish Bank was nationalised. In the new package, AIB and Bank of Ireland are each provided with €3.5 billion. That money buys the Irish Government preference shares in each bank, with a fixed 8% return. The Irish Government get 25% of the voting rights of the bank and can appoint 25% of the boards of directors. The Government money is from the Irish national pensions reserve fund.

The risks that have emerged in the Irish banks are related to their overexposure to the construction and property markets; they are not the result of the complex financial instruments — such as credit-crunch financing — that caused difficulties for banks such as Northern Rock. The Irish Government package is linked to the banks' increasing lending capacity, which has increased by 10% in relation to small enterprises and by 30% in relation to the provision of mortgages to first-time buyers. In quarters when the mortgage pot of funds is not used fully, the balance will go to the small business pot in the following quarter. The increased lending capacity will be monitored by the regulator, and remuneration to senior executives is to be reduced by 33%. Therefore, no performance bonuses will be paid to senior executives. We had a wide-ranging discussion about that issue at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

We are all concerned that this has come on us in an incredible way over the past 12 to 18 months. Many people are, obviously, asking why none of this was predicted 18 months ago, although a few wise owls

have come forward claiming that they knew all along and had predicted that this would happen.

11.00 am

When we talk about the economic downturn, the big debate at the moment is whether we have reached the bottom. Obviously, when one reaches the bottom, the only way to go is up. However, no one can say when that will happen. In the past couple of weeks, I met people who said that they believed that we had reached the bottom. The First Minister and I met Peter Mandelson last week, and he told us that, in his estimation, we had not yet reached the bottom. So, opinions are a bit all over the place. We will know we have reached the bottom when we start to climb out. However, it is very dangerous to make a prediction as to when we will climb out — as some people in England recently found to their cost.

In response to the Member's second question, I take heart from the fact that, probably since the foundation of the Northern state and with the work of InterTradeIreland, there has been more trade now between businesses North and South than at any time in our history. We are concerned to see how the present economic circumstances will affect that trade. I hope that it will not be to the detriment of businesses North and South. As with all else, however, it is difficult to make a prediction.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I thank him and his ministerial colleagues for the positive work in the meeting that he jointly chaired. Ministers and their Departments will be involved in the work of the review group. Will any of that work be shared with Committees, so that they can have relevant insight? The Minister referred to the north-west gateway initiative and the INTERREG IVa programmes. Will he ensure that there are specific items on the agenda of plenary meetings to deal with significant flagship projects, including the valid item raised by Martina Anderson?

Given the issues on which the deputy First Minister has touched, in his statement and in his answers, and given the impact of the economic downturn and the significant issues that the Executive and the Government in the South are trying to address, is there a case for using the cross-sectoral format, which is provided for in the agreement but has not yet been used, to bring together the Ministers who deal with the key strategic economic issues, such as spatial strategy, infrastructure investment, enterprise support and the skills agenda, so that they can look at those issues in a more focused way, and so that the next plenary meeting will work off the back of that cross-sectoral format?

The deputy First Minister: As regards working with Committees, we will look at that issue in consultation with Ministers and the Irish Government.

The Member has indicated correctly the impact that the economic downturn is having on us. Therefore, as we move forward, Ministers North and South accept that we should explore consistently how we can combat the worst effects of the economic downturn in a way that is mutually beneficial to us and to the Government in the South. That threatens no one. We all understand that, in challenging times, we must meet those challenges with innovative ideas and solutions. Some of the ideas and solutions that the Member offered this morning are worthy of consideration. I have no doubt that, as we go forward, those who are charged with the responsibility of examining those issues will consider those comments.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Ministers for their statement, and welcome the progress that is contained in it. The Programme for Government has a commitment to an all-island animal-health strategy. Will the deputy First Minister give us more detail on the progress being made on that strategy in the NSMC? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: Obviously, the animal health issue is a concern for all of us. When the subject cropped up at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, it was clear that there were concerns on both sides of the border about the difficulties that we faced against a backdrop of a fairly major news story. We noted the progress on the draft all-island animal health and welfare strategy at the plenary meeting. We were pleased to learn about the continuing co-operation on a wide range of animal health and welfare issues and to hear about the constructive work being undertaken by officials, North and South.

The development of an all-island animal health strategy is a commitment in the Programme for Government. The draft strategy was issued for stakeholder consultation in March 2008. There were three consultation responses, all of which supported the draft strategy. Officials also consulted the Assembly's Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. As the comments received during the consultation had no specific impact on the strategy as it is currently drafted, Ministers will be asked to agree the all-island animal health and welfare strategy at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in agriculture sectoral format.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Speaker, I am conscious of what you said earlier to a Member about asking questions. There is major public concern about the North/South interconnector — a 400 kV electricity overhead interconnector. Were there any discussions on that, and does the deputy First Minister intend to initiate some discussions in a future plenary meeting of the council?

Will he also provide an update on the A5 north-west gateway to Aghnacloy? Go raibh míle maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: There was no discussion whatsoever on the interconnector, but I am conscious that the topic has generated considerable controversy recently. No doubt Members and Ministers will turn their attention to the ongoing campaign on the matter, and various opinions have already been expressed. However, the interconnector was not an agenda item at the meeting.

Although the north-west gateway initiative is not part of the established NSMC work area, it is another good example of cross-border co-operation. Since the formal announcement on the gateway in May 2006, the task of officials has been to find ways in which our Executive and the Irish Government, working in co-operation, can attract new employers and other economic benefits in order to rejuvenate the region. Although it has no associated funding, it aims to derive greater synergy in the north-west through the effective co-ordination of existing public expenditure. If our endeavours are successful, they will bring benefits for all parts of the region, which is defined as the council areas of Derry, Limavady, Strabane and Donegal.

Our officials continue to work with all the key stakeholders in the north-west to identify policy areas, where increased co-operation and sharing of expertise will provide benefits for all. We welcome the increased focus on the opportunities that exist in the north-west as witnessed by the recent north-west city regions conference, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development conference and other similar events that are planned for the near future.

We are also very encouraged by the progress to date and by the large number of projects that are under way, further progress on which will individually and cumulatively bring economic, environmental, tourism, health and social benefits that will improve the quality of lives in the region. Such progress will require strong and focused co-operation across all sectors of business and Government.

Progress has already been made on a number of key projects — for example, infrastructural investment on roads in the north-west, including, as I mentioned earlier, the upgrading to dual carriageway status of the A5 from Aghnacloy to the north-west. The preferred route announcement for that project is expected in mid-2009. The A6 Derry to Dungiven preferred route announcement is also expected in the summer of 2009. The A514 and the A515 are already opened, and construction on the A2 Broadbridge dualling scheme is to commence in 2009, with a completion date of 2010.

The Executive and the Irish Government have committed £14 million of joint investment in City of Derry Airport. That has resulted in the completion of

the eastern runway safety area, and signalling work will be completed by April 2009.

Improvements will be made to the Ballymena-to-Coleraine and Derry-to-Coleraine train lines. After that work is complete, additional trains will be deployed, which will result in a more frequent, faster and more reliable service.

There is practical cross-border co-operation on health in the form of a pilot cross-border GP out-of-hours service for patients from Inishowen. Other examples include the delivery of radiotherapy services at the cancer centre in Belfast City Hospital to patients from Donegal, and the announcement that additional radiotherapy services will be located at Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

The draft non-statutory north-west spatial plan and framework has been prepared jointly by Departments from the North and South and provides a high-level policy context for the future development of the region. The framework examines the region in its totality for the first time, as opposed to previous back-to-back planning.

As Members can see, much work is taking place and, as we move forward, the practical benefits of that for everyone concerned will be evident.

Mr McCallister: How and when will the 10-point action plan on suicide prevention be implemented? How does that action plan link with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety strategy on the suicide prevention?

Concerns have been expressed about Middletown Centre for Autism, including emergency health cover in the area, the cost of the number of pupils who attend the centre, and the costs and logistics for parents and family members of pupils who travel to the centre and stay there. Was any work undertaken to address some of those concerns? Will the deputy First Minister provide a rough estimate of the number of children from Northern Ireland who will attend the centre?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have information on that issue, but I will ensure that the Member receives an answer. There are many issues associated with the Middletown Centre for Autism, the detail on which I do not have to hand. However, I will write to the Member with that information.

Suicide is a terrible tragedy that devastates many families each year. We are aware of the growing concerns about the increase in the number of suicides, particularly among young people. Although the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety leads on suicide prevention, we are keen to support any initiatives that may lead to a reduction in the number of suicides. As we all know, suicide and self-harm respect no

borders, so it is common sense for us to share learning and best practice in our respective jurisdictions.

The self-harm registry pilot in the Western Health and Social Services Board area is an example of such co-operation. The interim findings from that pilot are of considerable concern and show that alcohol was a factor in many cases of self-harm, albeit not one of the main methods. Action to address excessive alcohol consumption in society is an urgent priority, and it is something that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is addressing through the new strategic direction on alcohol and drugs.

All Members will agree that sensitive media reporting on suicide is essential, generally and in respect of specific cases. With the full support of the Executive, Minister McGimpsey has made representations to newspaper editors on that matter. We welcome the development of updated all-island guidelines on media reporting and the establishment of a media-monitoring process.

The promotion of suicide and self-harm on the Internet is also of particular concern. Minister McGimpsey represents local interests on the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, which was established following the Byron Review into harmful material on the Internet and in video games. Minister McGimpsey has undertaken to ensure that the work of the council is shared with his colleagues from the Irish Government.

The issue of suicide impacts on every community throughout the island, and few Members will not be aware of a circumstance in which someone has taken their own life. We have consistently argued for, and proposed, programmes that encourage people to talk about their problems and difficulties.

Even in recent times, we have seen professional people — and other people — who have provided advice to the media on how people should deal with those situations and who have subsequently taken their own lives. That is a terrible tragedy, but it exemplifies how difficult the issue is to deal with. Ultimately, the work that is ongoing to develop an all-island approach will bring huge benefits. However, it is a terrible tragedy, and we must be very sensitive about how we deal with it. We must also be very forceful in trying to do everything in our power to ensure that we reduce the unacceptable levels of suicide and the impact that it is having on families and communities.

11.15 am

Mr Dallat: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I am particularly interested in the section about banking, in which he stated that there was a broad discussion about the common economic challenges. However, given that the North/South Ministerial Council is a cross-border body, was there any discussion on the problems faced by small- and

medium-sized businesses that trade across the border? If so, what progress has been made with the banks?

The other issue relates to postal services, which are fragmented. They also need to be discussed at some time in the future.

The deputy First Minister: There is a great deal of interest in the condition of the local banking sector, and the innovative approach recently announced by the Irish Government to provide a wide-ranging indemnity to Irish banks will be welcomed by depositors and borrowers.

Financial institutions in Britain, including banks, mortgage and insurance providers are covered by the financial services compensation scheme, which protects the first £50,000 of deposits.

We met representatives of the four banks in the North, and we have recently seen the Royal Bank of Scotland freeing up the Ulster Bank's ability to lend. Hopefully, that is the beginning of an acceptance by the banks that building confidence in the economy and in the banking system is critical. However, it represents a real challenge.

We are all very conscious of the impact that the banking crisis is having on small businesses and on people who wish to purchase their own homes. The fact is that people are sitting back and waiting to see whether the market has bottomed out, whether prices have levelled out, and whether it is the right time to buy. Therefore, there is a responsibility on the banks.

We met Ministers in Magee campus, and we agreed that it is very important to get the banks lending again and doing it in a way that instils confidence in the business community. However, it is a difficult area. It is almost a chicken-and-egg situation, but the banks must take the lead. The support that the Governments in London and Dublin have given to the banks makes it incumbent on them to move forward in a way that meets the concerns and needs of the small- and medium-sized businesses about which the Member spoke.

We are all very conscious of the fact that there will be ramifications flowing from everything that has happened in the past 12 to 18 months. As time passes, we will see the world economic forces, particularly those with responsibilities for Governments, cracking down hard on the banks and ensuring that the old ways of dealing will not return.

In a number of contributions from President Obama, he was very critical of bankers in the United States of America. That criticism will pass, but people will expect regulations and processes to be put in place to ensure that such a situation is never visited upon us again.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Will the deputy First Minister

detail any progress that was made at the plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in relation to the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal?

The deputy First Minister: Obviously, the project is important, and we have been dealing with it over several years. Waterways Ireland has held discussions with a wide range of statutory agencies and has met 46 out of the possible 50 landowners involved. Their holdings represent 97% of the ownership of the linear length of the canal. Waterways Ireland has decided to undertake the preliminary design stage internally and, following the acquisition of land and receipt of planning permission, a contract for the design and construction of the project will be let out to a single entity. Waterways Ireland reports on progress at monthly monitoring meetings with the sponsoring Departments and, on a regular basis, to the North/South Ministerial Council. Waterways Ireland intends to seek planning permission by mid-2010. That will be followed by tendering for the detailed design-and-build contract.

The estimated cost of restoring the section from Clones to Upper Lough Erne is €35 million. The construction cost is funded entirely by the Government in Dublin and, when it is built, the Department will contribute to ongoing operational costs. The 2006 outline business case indicated a capital cost of £171.5 million for the restoration of the entire canal. That includes: site investigation, the environmental impact assessment and project management, as well as construction costs. So things are beginning to move.

Dr Farry: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. In his report, he stressed the mutual benefits that flow from North/South co-operation. Will he elaborate on what he sees as the opportunities that arise for that? In particular, I ask whether he shares my belief that there is an opportunity, in the midst of the economic downturn, to promote the development of renewable technology in both North and South and to market the island of Ireland as a green economy.

The deputy First Minister: I agree very much that, given the circumstances that exist internationally, people are focused on the green agenda. It is important to support that as much as possible and face up to the huge challenges that our planet faces.

There are benefits to be had from cross-border renewable energy incentives. Since its introduction in 2005, the renewables obligation has proved successful by increasing the proportion of electricity generated from renewable sources by 60%.

There is no indication that the operation of different renewables support mechanisms North and South is a constraint on renewables development across the island. The different approaches to incentivising renewables taken by North and South reflect the

South's status as a separate member state with its own renewables target. Harmonisation of energy support systems between the North and South is a complex issue and would be difficult to implement, at least in the short term. Issues to be considered for any such harmonisation of incentives include: the different member-state targets in the EU; the legislative changes required; the operation of the incentives within the wider obligations imposed on the North by London; the treatment of the legitimate expectations of generators under existing support mechanisms; accounting for different currencies; and the impact on investor confidence.

Co-operation on renewables policy will be increasingly important in the light of new and challenging EU targets.

As to the economic benefits of cross-border co-operation, I offer two examples: there has been a huge increase in the level of trade between North and South, as a result of the work of IntertradeIreland, and that is a good thing for businesses. There has also been such an increase in the numbers of tourists arriving and travelling to the North and to the South as a result of the work of Tourism Ireland. There are many, many benefits, and Members have a duty and responsibility to their constituents to work with the Government in Dublin on projects that are mutually beneficial.

An interesting aspect to the influx of tourists to Ireland is that, whereas in the past they came mainly to places like Killarney, Connemara and Dublin, they now increasingly come to the North.

Increasingly, people who live in the South and who have never been here are coming to the North. There are busloads of tourists coming from places such as Mayo and Limerick. People are very relaxed about coming to the North, and I think that that is a good thing. Many of those visitors want to explore the lakes of Fermanagh, the north Antrim coast, the Sperrins, and many other beautiful parts of the North.

Mr McElduff: East Belfast. [*Laughter.*]

The deputy First Minister: The less said about east Belfast, the better. [*Laughter.*]

We all recognise that this is a mutually beneficial situation, and I have no doubt that the people who come to the North will want to see the tremendous attractions in east Belfast, not least — when it is built — the new Titanic signature project.

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the joint First Minister for his statement. I note that the NSMC discussed a paper on the North/South consultative forum. Can the joint First Minister advise us what the general tenor —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us get the terminology right: it is the deputy First Minister.

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can the First Minister advise what the general tenor of the ensuing discussion was, and whether any opposition was expressed by any of those present to the setting up of such a forum?

The deputy First Minister: As I said, this is a work in progress based on proposals put forward by the Irish Government and the ongoing review of the Civic Forum. That review takes on the structure, membership and role of the Civic Forum and considers the most appropriate arrangements for engaging with civic society. The consultation phase of the review ran from 29 May 2008 to 29 August 2008, and 60 written submissions were received. The review team is currently finalising its work and will report to us in the near future. The NSMC had previously agreed to consider that matter when the review is complete.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement made by the deputy First Minister. We are coming to the end of the time allowed and most of the questions have been asked; however, I think it is important that the issues of suicide and child protection are taken forward on an all-island basis. It is a pity that the Health Minister did not see fit to attend the meeting, given that those important issues were on the agenda. Perhaps John McCallister should ask his own Minister why he did not attend. With that in mind, can the deputy First Minister assure the Assembly that the Executive will continue to take forward, on an all-Ireland basis, the important issues of suicide and child protection, despite the Health Minister's not attending the meeting?

The deputy First Minister: I assure the Member that the Executive, including the Health Minister, are very conscious that those issues have to be treated as priorities. Child protection and suicide prevention are clear priorities for the Executive, and we will do whatever needs to be done on an all-island basis to impact on the unacceptable levels of child abuse and suicide.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the deputy Minister's statement. It clearly was a productive meeting in the city of Derry in respect of so many issues. I welcome the commitment and priority given to alcohol misuse and abuse; it is obvious to so many of us that the culture of binge drinking among young people is increasingly getting worse.

The deputy First Minister made reference to the progress of the gateway initiative and the A5; were any other infrastructural or telecommunication projects discussed at the meeting? If OFMDFM is still the lead partner on the north-west gateway initiative, what discussion took place around its delivery and progression of telecommunications projects, particularly in reference to those projects in the city of Derry? Can we have a commitment that that will be on the agenda for future

meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, along with the single electricity market?

11.30 am

The deputy First Minister: The Member is really asking: what role did OFMDFM play in the recent controversy in the north-west? OFMDFM played no part in the decision-making process or the EU state-aid application for Project Kelvin. Project Kelvin is a joint project between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and is part-funded through INTERREG IV.

Decisions pertaining to Project Kelvin, including the landing place in Portrush and the telehouse in Coleraine, were matters for those Departments. Through its work in co-ordinating the north-west gateway initiative, OFMDFM received a number of updates from DETI, which gave an overview of the general progress of the project, but which did not include details of the location of the telehouse. OFMDFM was unaware of the plans to site the telehouse in Coleraine until the official announcement was made. OFMDFM officials have since seen a copy of the INTERREG application, and Coleraine was not mentioned in it.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Given the business need to harmonise financial sectors and to enhance all-Ireland mobility, what progress has been made on harmonising the transfer of pensions and reducing the cost of cross-border banking? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: At the meeting that was held in institutional format on 30 October 2007, Ministers decided that a joint working group of officials from relevant Departments, including Finance Departments, and from relevant regulatory authorities should be established to examine cross-border banking issues, including transaction charges, and that it should be asked to report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The cost of cross-border banking can be significantly higher than the cost of domestic transactions, even in the same banking group. The working group comprises representatives from the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Consumer Council in the North, the Department of Finance and the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat. The Irish Financial Services Regulatory Authority acts as an adviser to the group.

Officials met the four main banking groups — AIB, Bank of Ireland, Ulster Bank and Northern Bank. With the exception of the Ulster Bank, they agreed to provide details of their fees and charges for inclusion in a comparative table, which has been published on the cross-border mobility website, 'Border People'. A number of smaller banks have also provided material for the table, which provides transparency for

consumers about the fees and charges for typical cross-border banking transactions.

Mr Shannon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you make a ruling on how the deputy First Minister should be addressed? Today, the deputy First Minister has been referred to as “joint First Minister” and as “First Minister”. Clearly, the position is “deputy First Minister”, as the First Minister is sitting on this side of the House. Can a ruling be made to clear up the wrong terminology that some Members — particularly those from a party that is trying to find its own identity — have used?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I have previously ruled on the issue of terminology in the House, including that which is used to refer to a political party. I will be strict in applying that ruling to what people are called. Let us not play games in the House; there is a First Minister and a deputy First Minister. I have already ruled on the terminology that is to be used, including that which is used to refer to political parties and political individuals.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. That republican term was first used by the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Basil McCrea. I let it pass because nobody pays much attention to him anyway, but the term was later used by a deputy Speaker. It is a most serious issue that someone who, at least, should know the position — although sometimes one might doubt it — is prepared to make those kind of remarks. That is a matter that the Speaker’s Office should look at.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will repeat what I have said, and I know that some Members play games with terminology. However, Members know exactly what I have ruled on the whole issue of terminology in the House. I have made the position absolutely clear, and there should be no grey areas. If Members feel that there is a grey area, please come and talk to me outside the Chamber.

Mr B McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I will, indeed, come to speak to you. However, the issue is that given that it is a joint office, would it be —

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, the Member is almost challenging the authority of the Speaker. That is where he is going. I have made my ruling. Correct terminology must be used in the House. The Member knows exactly what I mean by that. It is absolutely clear. I have made a number of rulings on the matter, even, as I said earlier, on the calling of political parties when some Members want to add names to the title of a political party, which they clearly know to be incorrect. Therefore, let the House be absolutely clear on that issue.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 5/08] be agreed.

This debate, as Members know, follows the Supply resolutions for the 2008-09 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2009-2010 Vote on Account, which were considered and approved yesterday, and the Bill’s First Stage, which followed immediately thereafter. In moving the motion, I shall briefly draw attention to a few issues that relate to the Bill.

As was mentioned yesterday, for logistical reasons, accelerated passage of the Bill is needed in order to ensure that it receives Royal Assent in March, and, therefore, legal authority for Departments and other public bodies to spend the cash and use the resources in 2008-09, and to ensure a seamless flow of public services into 2009-2010 by the Vote on Account. Therefore, today’s process follows on from yesterday, it is technical in nature, and provides the legal authority for Departments in relation to this financial year and the first few months of next year.

I am grateful that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed, in line with Standing Order 42, that it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that it is content that the Bill may proceed by accelerated passage. I understand that confirmation was given in a letter from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to the Speaker. Once again, I welcome and appreciate the Committee’s assistance in this matter.

The purpose of the Bill is to give legislative effect to the 2008-09 spring Supplementary Estimates and to the 2009-2010 Vote on Account approved through the Supply resolutions that were passed yesterday. Copies of the spring Supplementary Estimates volume, the Vote on Account document, the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members.

In accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate envisaged under Standing Order 30, and for the benefit of Members, I wish to summarise briefly the main features of the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to authorise the issue of £12,485,717,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund, and the use of resources totalling £15,730,008,000 by Departments and certain other bodies as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09. Those amounts supersede the Vote on Account for 2008-09 in the

Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which was passed in February last year, and the Main Estimates provision in the Budget (No 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 that was passed by the Assembly in June.

The sums to be issued from the Consolidated Fund are to be appropriated by each Department or public body for services set out in column 1 of schedule 1 to the Bill. The resources are to be used for the purposes specified in column 1 of schedule 2 to the Bill.

The Bill also authorises a Vote on Account for 2009-2010 of cash of £5,618,965,000 and resources of £7,078,596,000 in order to allow the flow of cash and resources to continue to public services in the early months of 2009-2010, until the Main Estimates and the related Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly in June of this year.

The cash and the resources are to be appropriated and used for the services and the purposes set out in column 1 of schedules 3 and 4 respectively. In addition, the Bill revises for 2008-09 the limit on the amount of accruing resources — operating and non-operating — that may be directed by my Department to be used for the purposes in column 1 of schedule 2.

Under section 8 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, a direction on the actual use of accruing resources will be provided by way of a DFP minute that is laid before the Assembly following the Bill's Royal Assent.

Clause 5 of the Bill authorises temporary borrowing by the Department of Finance and Personnel not exceeding £2,809,483,000 for 2009-2010.

The Budget Bill, therefore, brings to a close the first financial year of the Executive's Budget for 2008-2011. Clearly, the next stage is the provisional out-turn in May, which is followed by the preparation of resource accounts and the vexed question of underspends. It is clear that the Executive and the Assembly have achieved much; however, there is still much to do. Many challenges await us around the corner during the next financial year.

As I have said repeatedly, Ministers must move on and develop a culture of delivery of public services within the resources that are allocated to them and ensure that that delivery takes place wisely and well, rather than there being a constant focus on spend and additional moneys.

The spending plans that are reflected in the Budget Bill have been approved and endorsed by the House unanimously. Therefore, there is little more that I can usefully add on the Bill's substance as regards its giving legislative effect to those resolutions. However, I am happy to deal with any points of principle that may arise.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): At the outset, I will speak on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I will make some remarks in a personal capacity at a later stage. I shall indicate when I am not speaking as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee. I will ignore the lack of protocol that just happened, Mr Speaker.

The Budget Bill that has been brought before the House has two elements. It provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2008-09, taking account of what has emerged from the current year's monitoring rounds. It also includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue during the early part of the next financial year until the Main Estimates for 2009-2010 are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

Standing Order 42(2) states that the Committee for Finance and Personnel may grant accelerated passage to a Budget Bill provided that it is satisfied that it has been consulted appropriately on the Bill's provisions. At the Committee's meeting on 4 February 2009, DFP officials briefed members and subsequently took questions on the contents of the Budget Bill that is being debated.

That evidence session represented the culmination of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of in-year monitoring rounds both in respect of DFP as a Department and with regard to public expenditure at strategic and cross-departmental levels. Following that briefing, the Committee decided to recommend accelerated passage of the Budget Bill. The Chairperson subsequently wrote to the Speaker to inform him of the Committee's decision.

I want to take the opportunity to refer briefly to arrangements going forward. During the Committee's scrutiny of the Budget Bill — and, previously, of the Executive's strategic stocktake position — consideration was given to the Budget process that was adopted by the Executive this year. That process is currently the subject of a review that is being led by the Department of Finance and Personnel on the Executive's behalf.

Running in tandem with the Executive's review, the Committee for Finance and Personnel is conducting an inquiry into the scrutiny of the Executive's Budget and expenditure. The Committee agreed a co-ordinated submission to the Executive's review in October 2008 as the first stage of its inquiry, having already taken the views of the Assembly's other Statutory Committees.

In its submission, the Committee called for the Budget process to maximise opportunities for Assembly Committees to provide early input and for a set timetable to be agreed that will determine when Departments will provide information to Committees.

The Committee also calls for a move away from the existing incremental approach to planning and budgeting towards a system that provides a transparent link between input and output.

The Committee has also recently received assurances from DFP of its intention to begin a rolling programme of baseline reviews that will cover all departmental expenditure within three to five years. Assembly Committees will have an important role to play in scrutinising the outcomes of those baseline reviews.

DFP's response on behalf of the Executive to the co-ordinated Committee submission has been delayed slightly. DFP officials are due to brief the Committee on its response on 18 March 2009. Members will subsequently have an opportunity to give further consideration to the future Budget process that is proposed.

However, that is all for the future; today, I support the motion on behalf of the Committee.

11.45 am

I wish to make some criticisms of the Budget process and the direction that the Minister and the entire Executive have agreed to take. No one, least of all me, could fail to acknowledge that these are difficult economic times. Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve, described the economic situation as a "once-in-a-century" event, and the UK Schools Secretary said that it is the worst recession for 100 years.

Any number of commentators have talked about the difficulty of these times, and no one can deny that Northern Ireland, too, is facing difficulty. The Minister acknowledged that point yesterday, and I am sure that every Member here would also acknowledge it. It is a matter of how we respond to what is happening.

Some people have characterised the difficulties as a "black hole". I will stand corrected if anyone here is better at astrophysics than I am, but my understanding is that a black hole is created by the collapse of a star. The stars of some of those Members who have spoken of black holes are fading to the point of collapse; indeed, the collapse of those so-called stars may be contributing to the black hole. The use of the term "black hole" is a sensationalist attempt to grab headlines, without any probing of its veracity.

The supposed source of the black hole is the returns from Departments in the strategic stocktake, which was concluded recently. An examination of the detail of those returns indicates that Departments bid for everything that they want, which is a culture that has developed through the years. Departments bid for everything willy-nilly, sometimes without even probing what they are asking for. The nature of the stocktake allowed Departments to do that.

The Department of Education, for example, bid for almost £9 million each year to meet energy and utility cost pressures. I would have given that request more credence if it had appeared in a Budget or stocktake a year ago, because we were experiencing unprecedented increases in energy prices at that time. We all suffered those increases as consumers, and we saw how our constituents and local businesses were affected. However, energy prices have fallen dramatically since this time last year and, indeed, since the Budget was set.

Without probing the matter in any great detail, I question why a Department would ask for £9 million each year to cover increased energy costs at a time when energy costs are going down. Indeed, energy costs are currently less than what would have been factored into the original Budget. Therefore, I question the veracity of that request.

There are other expenditures to do with job evaluations and matters that should be handled by Departments within their budgets. Requests for capital expenditure are made willy-nilly, without any particular projects being put against them. There seems to be a never-ending demand for cash in some quarters. A probe into the veracity of some of the requests shows that many of them are not as pressing as some Members would have us believe. There are things on the list that we would all like to do and areas where we would all like money to be spent. However, whether some of the pressures outlined in the requests are valid, legitimate or credible as we move into the next two years is a matter that is entirely up for discussion.

Some Members of the Ulster Unionist Party have talked about the black hole. Indeed, I note that they have said that they will abstain today and vote accordingly if given the opportunity to do so. I have questioned the veracity of the black hole, but I am not sure how much credence should be given to their claim that they will vote against the Budget Bill.

Yesterday, at around this time, we heard from those Benches that they were going to vote against the Supplementary Estimates and vote against —

Mr McNarry: That is a lie.

Mr Hamilton: It certainly is not a lie. That party said that it opposed the Supplementary Estimates. I have been accused of being a liar by a Member who is —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. Mr McNarry, you need to reflect on what you have said. In fact, I ask you to withdraw the remark on the basis that it is unparliamentary to accuse another Member of telling lies.

Mr McNarry: I believe that the honourable Member did so.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not what I asked. The terminology that you used clearly constitutes

unparliamentary language as outlined in the procedures of the House. I ask the Member to withdraw his comments and to reflect on them.

Mr McNarry: On the basis of accepting your guidance, I withdraw the remark. I will find another way to deal with the misrepresentation that has been made. However, in line with what you have asked me, I unreservedly do so.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you rule on the fact that this is the second time that the same Member has, essentially, made the same remark and shouted the same accusation from a sedentary position in the space of 24 hours? Yesterday, he accused the Minister of Finance and Personnel of telling “fibs” and was asked to withdraw the remark. Is it in order for a Member to accuse people of lying and to get off scot-free because he immediately withdraws that remark? That is surely a bad precedent to set.

Mr Speaker: I dealt with that matter at the time. I have clearly told the Member that accusing another Member of telling lies is unparliamentary, and I have asked the Member to withdraw his remarks and to reflect on them. He has done that.

Mr Hamilton: That diversion illustrates the silly extent to which the Member will go in the House. I want to correct my good friend and colleague Mr Weir: it is not the second time that Mr McNarry has retreated from his comments in the Chamber — it is the third time, and I am happy to stand over that assertion. At the end of Mr McNarry’s contribution yesterday, he said:

“That is another good reason why we will not be supporting the Minister.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 38, p8, col 2*].

If he is not supporting the Minister, he is opposing him. When his party says that it will abstain today, I do not know whether that is a credible claim.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it is not just the Finance Minister whom Mr McNarry is not supporting? He also does not support the two Ministers from his own party, because the Ulster Unionist Party’s approach to yesterday’s debate could have resulted in those two Ministers having no money to spend from the beginning of April. Given the recession and the crisis in the Health Service, such an approach is unforgivable.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right. Individual Members might disagree with the emphasis that the Executive place on different elements of expenditure and how money is allocated. However, it is clear that if Mr McNarry had been able to persuade his party and others in the Chamber to support his position yesterday, the Government of Northern Ireland would have ground to a halt from 31 March. Whatever we think about what the Executive are doing, that approach is not the way

forward, but if Mr McNarry had had his way, that would have happened yesterday. He says that he will abstain today; he might try to abstain, but I do not know whether he will be able to persuade some of his colleagues to do so.

He fundamentally misunderstands the purpose of today’s debate. The Budget Bill will give effect to the resolutions that the House voted for yesterday and will secure a regularisation of what has happened with in-year monitoring this year and will provide a cash float for next year. I am sure that wiser Members in the Chamber will consider and reflect upon that issue — regardless of any personal opposition to the Executive’s actions — and appreciate the rationale behind today’s debate.

All the questions that have been asked about black holes and whether there is a deficit beg questions to the Members who pose them; what would the Ulster Unionist Party do in these circumstances?

We are well used to outbursts and stunts, and as Mr Weir said, the idea that a penny can be stretched —

Mr McNarry: Yesterday’s record.

Mr Hamilton: You are going to hear it again, because it is an important matter. The Member’s party reissues his statements again from yesterday, and if he is going to speak today —

Mr Weir: It is his never-ending one.

Mr Hamilton: At least he is recycling. That is good, and I am sure that the Environment Minister will be pleased to hear that. The Member is rehashing the same stuff that he has been repeating week in, week out, for the past number of months, even though it has been challenged and has been shown to be completely wrong.

The question of what the Ulster Unionist Party would do in the circumstances must be posed and answered. People in the Chamber, and, more importantly, the people of Northern Ireland, deserve a credible answer to that question. We are well used to the sort of stunts that have characterised the Member in recent weeks, such as the grandly named equity-release scheme, which would effectively involve selling off our buildings in the hope that some money could be made. I think that he could even be accused, at one time, of wanting to sell the Building in which we are standing. There was also the one-penny cut, and a number of other stunts and nonsense from the Ulster Unionist Party.

It is actually quite difficult to define the position of the Ulster Unionist Party precisely. On the one hand we have the comments made by Mr McNarry about what should happen to the Programme for Government and the Budget — that they should be completely rewritten. He claimed the other day that they are not fit for purpose. On the other hand, we have his party

leader, an Executive Minister who supported today's Budget at Executive meetings, as well as supporting the spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account. When questioned by the BBC about whether the Programme for Government and Budget were dead in the water, the Minister said that he does not accept that, and said that although some of the targets are problematic, he does not believe that that should mean a complete rewrite. There is complete divergence between the views of Reg Empey and David McNarry.

What the Ulster Unionist Party wants to do to the Budget was spelt out honestly by Mr Basil McCrea yesterday — I say "Basil" because I see that my colleague William McCrea is here, and I would not like him to cast one of his famous looks at me. Yesterday, in the Chamber, Basil McCrea spelt out very clearly the Ulster Unionist Party's position if it got its way. He said:

"All that I ask is that the Minister provides some sort of steer about whether or not we have a problem. If we have a problem, it is incumbent on all Members to identify the issues and to work together to try to resolve that problem, because if tough decisions have to be taken, that can be done only through consensus. Only if we all agree that there is a problem, and only if we all agree that cuts have to be made, can cuts be made." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 38, p15, col 1*].

The Ulster Unionist Party is talking about cuts to budget lines. At least Basil McCrea was honest about that — as I said, it is sometimes difficult to discern exactly the position of the Ulster Unionist Party. Having enjoyed the debate yesterday, he showed us the natural extension of what his call for cuts would mean — that no budget line, no Department and no Minister's money would be immune from those sorts of cuts, least of all his own colleague the Health Minister, whose budget accounts for 50% of the overall money available to the Executive and the House to spend. Today, Basil McCrea says that the Health budget should not be made to suffer. Perhaps he has now spoken to his friend the Minister for Health who has told him that he does want to give up any money.

I am not surprised that the Health Minister does not want to give up money, given the way in which he behaved over a year ago when even though he received the biggest allocation for health in the history of Northern Ireland and the biggest allocation in the Executive by a million miles, he still demanded more money. I am not surprised that Basil has perhaps been hauled in and told to desist from talk of cuts. However, cuts would be the outworking of what Members are proposing as an alternative to the Budget, because there is no new money available — in fact, quite the opposite. Westminster is suggesting that there could be as much as 5% further efficiency cuts.

Indeed, if the Ulster Unionist Members' new friends and colleagues in the Conservative Party had their way, those cuts, and more, would be made come April

this year. What sort of serious detrimental effect would that, or indeed, the Labour Government's proposed cuts, have on Northern Ireland? Those sorts of cuts to Budget lines would be the inevitable consequence of the position that the Member's party has taken.

12.00 noon

There is no new money; there is no will, certainly on this side of the House, to increase revenue by putting up rates. In fact, the opposite is the case; the Minister of Finance and Personnel has, wisely and prudently, cut rates and provided relief for businesses, companies, individuals, householders and vulnerable groups of people, such as pensioners. The Member's idea of rewriting the Budget would result only in Budget cuts. That has to mean cuts to health and education.

The Executive have been criticised in many quarters about what they intend to do. However, they have invested £1.4 billion in infrastructure in this year alone. That is a record level of investment in Northern Ireland, which is much in excess of last year's £1.1 billion. As recently as 2003, the level of investment stood between £600 million and £700 million, so it has more than doubled in a very short period. That shows that there has been a clear difference between direct rule and devolution.

Over the next three years, approximately £600 million will be invested in roads; £650 million in water infrastructure; more than £500 million in healthcare and hospital modernisation; £855 million in schools and colleges; and more than £900 million in social housing. Those are big projects that will make a radical difference to the way Northern Ireland looks, and the way that public services are delivered in Northern Ireland.

The question for those Members who advocate cuts is this: what projects would they cut? Would they cut the £250 million in investment for building new Health Service facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital — in the Strangford constituency, which I and Mr McNarry represent — the Downe Hospital, Altnagelvin Area Hospital or the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Craigavon? What about the £200 million investment that is earmarked for 14 projects across the education and library boards? I could go on and on about those sorts of projects.

I am pleased and proud to say that many of those investments are in my Strangford constituency. Massive investment of approximately £4 million is planned for roads in Newtownards and a new social security and jobs and benefits office in the town. There will be new social housing all over the constituency. We are talking about £4 million pounds' worth —

Mr Cobain: Will the Member agree that the Programme for Government target for social housing, which promised 1,500 new social and affordable

homes, is not going to be met? Will he also agree that the child poverty targets are not going to be met? I can make a list of targets that are not going to be achieved and which will affect those who can least afford it.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his contribution. I apologise to him, because I omitted to include him among those who hold divergent views within his party. He wants to throw all sorts of money at social programmes, social housing and poverty targets. His views are completely different from those of some of his colleagues. Again, that shows the different emphases that exist in the Ulster Unionist Party; if the day has a “y” in it, there must be a split in that party.

The Member mentioned child poverty targets; unless it has escaped his notice, these are difficult economic times, and some people who would ordinarily have been in employment are not in employment anymore. That is having an adverse impact. However, Mr Cobain’s party colleagues, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and his party leader, who is the Minister for Employment and Learning, supported those targets. Indeed, Sir Reg Empey still says that all those targets, which are contained in the Budget, do not need to be rewritten. He is on public record as saying that, and that is clear.

I wonder what the consequences will be for some of the targets that the Member mentioned. I accept that he has a passion for the issues that he has raised, and they are important issues. However, his problem is that he is sitting in the ranks of a party that is advocating cuts to departmental budget lines.

How much worse off would those issues, about which the Member is so passionate, be if his colleagues had their way and the Budget were completely rewritten? No Department’s budget would be immune; they would all be slashed, including that for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, of which the Member’s colleague is the Minister.

Mr Cobain: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have to give way to Mr Cobain. Some of the issues that the Member spoke about are linked directly to the remit of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. A rewriting of the Budget — to take money from one aspect to give it to another — will affect the budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and some of the issues that the Member mentioned.

Mr Cobain: It is a pity that the Member was not present in the House last Monday, when his party colleagues advocated that certain elements of the health budget be ring-fenced. He was not there to criticise that point. As usual, Mr Hamilton picks and chooses what he thinks should be criticised.

A few weeks ago, the First Minister spoke in the House about child poverty targets and said that those will be met. Every Member knows that those targets will not be met. Mr Hamilton knows, as well as I do, that 2,000 new social homes are needed every year, but that only 800 will be built this year. Mr Hamilton listed some Health Service issues. I can list social issues that will not be met by the Budget. People at the lowest end of the poverty spectrum will be worse — not better — off. That is what I care about. I hope that Mr Hamilton cares about that too.

Mr Hamilton: I will not thank the Member for his intervention. First, the debate on efficiencies — which are, in fact, cuts — in the Health Service was held last Tuesday, not Monday. On Tuesday morning —

Mr Cobain: In the House, one day runs into the other.

Mr Hamilton: That is true. There is a sense of déjà vu today, and I know that I am contributing to that. That debate was held last Tuesday. Indeed, at this moment, I am supposed to be at a Committee meeting, which is where I have just come from. The Members on these Benches have good attendance records at Committees. I know that Mr Cobain’s colleagues have less than good attendance records. As Chief Whip of his party, perhaps the Member should address that issue.

I thank the Member, however, for making my point better than I did. He did so by highlighting the cuts that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has made. Indeed, the entire Ulster Unionist Party’s approach is now characterised by the word “cuts”.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety received a record allocation for his Department in the Budget. The allocation was the biggest in the history of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, and it was the biggest allocation, by far, in the entire Northern Ireland block. The Minister welcomed the efficiency savings and said that he had no problem in achieving those. He subsequently came forward with a package of cutting measures.

Between 1998 and 2007, the number of administrators in the Health Service increased by almost 33%, and the number of managers and senior managers increased by 100%. Closing homes, cutting ambulance services or sacking nurses are not efficiencies, especially when those are compared with the inefficiencies in administration.

Dr W McCrea: Surely the honourable Member for North Belfast cannot get away with this. His senior party — the Conservative Party — recommends that there should be no financial stimulus. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Mr McNarry must make his remarks through the Chair.

Dr W McCrea: I really do feel sorry for the Member; he seems to be rather agitated. Perhaps he should refer himself to his colleague, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr McGimspey.

The Ulster Unionist Party cannot have it both ways. Its senior party — the one that does the commanding and demanding — is telling it that there should be no financial stimulus but, rather, that there should be cuts. The Member spoke about all the issues that are not being met by the Budget. Will my honourable friend Mr Hamilton tell the House how the issues that Mr Cobain mentioned will be met under cuts?

Mr Hamilton: I thank my honourable friend for his intervention. His question, in fact, cannot be answered easily. If we were to cut back on budget lines and move money from one Department to another — which could have a positive effect on the health budget or no effect at all — we would have to remove money from somewhere else, which could affect issues close to the Member's heart, such as agriculture, enterprise or employment. It would be like robbing from Peter to pay Paul. Money would have to be taken from one Ulster Unionist Minister to give it to the other.

Some of the very important issues that the Member for North Belfast raised could not in any way be assisted. If, as he says, he believes that there are real pressures and problems in that area, they will only be exacerbated by cuts in departmental budget lines. If those problems are not exacerbated, then new problems will be created elsewhere in the Budget.

The prescience of the Executive in setting the economy as their number one target was absolutely correct. In fact, they were well ahead of the game in comparison with other devolved regions, which are now looking with some envy at what we are doing in having set the economy as an economic priority, and are having to rewrite their budgets to focus on the economy to the same level as us.

We would all like to see more money put into infrastructure and everything else, but we must live within our means. Encapsulated in this Budget is the Executive's priority to invest heavily in our infrastructure. That is the key to not only helping to ease the pain of the current economic downturn, but, more importantly, as Mr O'Loan said yesterday, focussing on not just the downturn but looking to the future. Serious investment in our infrastructure is the key to laying down the foundations — literally and metaphorically — for a brighter future for Northern Ireland so that when the inevitable upswing that will follow the current downturn comes, Northern Ireland will be well positioned to capitalise on that. Indeed, it may even get ahead of the Celtic tiger, which is now nothing more than a purring pussycat, and will be well

placed on this island — and in these islands overall — to capitalise on the upswing in a way that others may not be able to do.

I am pleased to support this Budget. It correctly continues to focus on economic growth for Northern Ireland as the way forward for our country. That was a priority on which we would all have unanimously agreed before devolution, and on which we unanimously agreed as parties when devolution occurred. It will, perhaps, not overcome the downturn or the recession, but it is still the right recipe to ease the pain as best we can and to build a future for Northern Ireland. All of us will be able to say that we took the right decisions at the right time, we prioritised the right things at the right time, and we put the money where it was needed — into our infrastructure. We will be able to say that we invested wisely, and that Northern Ireland and its people benefited from that.

Mr F McCann: A chairde, I support the Second Stage of the Bill, but I will make several comments regarding some of the real difficulties that we will face in the months and years ahead. It is not always easy to accept a proposal for accelerated passage or to deny debate at Committee Stage, but there are times when that is necessary, and I believe that this is one of those times.

In 2007, when the Programme for Government and the investment strategy were unveiled, it heralded a new chapter of local involvement in creating a Budget that would allow local politicians to set out their priorities to deal with many cross-cutting issues that affect our citizens. Like everyone else in this House, we had our disappointments, but we regard those disappointments as battles that have yet to be fought. I would have liked to see more resources allocated to address issues such as social deprivation, urban and rural regeneration, fuel poverty, homelessness and the general lack of social and affordable housing.

We believed that many other issues needed to be tackled, such as the provision of new hospitals, education and the building of a strong economy, so that well-paid jobs would be available for all of our citizens. No one could have predicted recent events in which capitalism has fallen flat on its face, causing major upheaval for everyone. In spite of everything, we in Sinn Féin argue that the Programme for Government still holds out for us the best-possible way forward.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No, I cannot. The Programme for Government sets out a path that deals with the economy, job creation, training, housing, health, education, culture and many other issues that will bring about some of the necessary improvements and changes that are so badly needed in our society. The Programme for Government provides a vision.

For many weeks, I have listened to some parties saying that we need to change the priorities and renegotiate the Programme for Government. However, I have heard little in the way of real substance or any strategy that would offer a better way forward.

12.15 pm

In recent days, we have listened to parties that are more interested in scoring political points than in offering priorities to help us get out of the mess that we are in. Their words are no more than empty rhetoric. At a time such as this, would it not be better to put our collective shoulders to the wheel and work together to bring about changes in citizens' lives. Is that not what leadership is about? We were elected to deliver change, but if change does not allow us to help those who are most in need, we have failed.

Every Member has his or her priorities. I believe that the social housing sector must be properly resourced. However, such investment should be part of an overall strategy, involving all aspects of housing, including the provision of social and affordable homes, a substantial budget for the maintenance and improvement of existing stock and funding for supported housing. We must examine new procurement arrangements and consider how effective social clauses can provide protection for local employment, encourage the training of apprentices and bring much-needed trade to local businesses.

Many Departments, including the Department for Social Development, have strategically placed land, which if used for housing could halve the cost of housing units. However, Departments must be willing to share the land. In addition, we need to know when developers will begin to deliver article-40 housing.

Members are led to believe that investment in social housing can rejuvenate the flagging housing sector, but no matter how much I want to see maximum investment in the social sector, social housing developments make up only a small proportion of housing supply. In 2006-07, 95% of the 14,731 houses built were for the private market and, in 2007-08, 90.2% of the 11,851 homes built were for the private market. It is the collapse of the private housing market that has had a devastating impact on the construction industry.

Recently, I heard of a developer who, although he was given a positive response by the bank for backing for a proposed development, learned that if he built the units, mortgages would not be available to those who might wish to purchase them. That story flags up the need for agencies to work together in a co-ordinated way to address the needs of the construction industry and the people who require housing, whether it is in the public or the private sector. I reiterate my belief that we must adhere to the Programme for Government

because it holds the best way to move forward from the present situation. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: A Budget is about income and expenditure. There has been much talk, particularly during yesterday's debate, about expenditure; however, how accurate is the income aspect of the Budget, which enables the Executive to authorise expenditure?

In last year's Budget, the Department of Finance and Personnel accepted the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) £200 million valuation of the Crossnacreevy site. Having listened closely to the Finance Minister yesterday, I accept that DARD was at fault for attributing non-zoned agricultural land with a development valuation. However, if I brought my local estate agent or bank manager to my 25-acre farm and asked to borrow money based on the price of development land, I wonder whether they would give me millions of pounds? I am quite certain that having checked it out, they would tell me that my land is agricultural land in a green belt. Therefore, the Finance Minister appears to be using a sleight of hand. Before accepting the £200 million valuation, his officials must have considered whether the land was in a green belt. I do not understand how the valuation was accepted.

Moreover, surely the former Finance Minister should have known the extent of the planning boundary in Castlereagh. In last year's Budget, the £200 million estimate was drawn to everyone's attention — one could not have missed it. Therefore, collective responsibility must be accepted for the failure.

Moving on, the proposed Budget authorises the issue of £12,486,000,000 from the Consolidated Fund and total expenditure of £15,730,000,000. A significant amount of money is raised through the regional rates.

Land and Property Services administers the collection of domestic and non-domestic rates, to the order of £850 million a year. That contributes to the income of the regional rates levy, which goes to the Executive, and an element is allocated to local government to fund its expenditure. The accuracy of the regional rates element can have a bearing on the income for expenditure that is used in the Budget.

Carrickfergus Borough Council, of which I am a member, established its rates process recently. That experience did not instil in me a great deal of confidence in Land and Property Services, which is an agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. During that rates process, there were huge variations in the demands of Land and Property Services.

Before Christmas, Carrickfergus Borough Council was advised that, due to a miscalculation, it would be liable for an additional £285,000 in the rates for 2008-09. I am aware of other councils that faced such huge variations. Subsequently, a few weeks ago,

Carrickfergus Borough Council was told that the estimates for 2009-2010 had been revised and that we would be receiving a further demand of approximately £380,000. That was reduced to £180,000 when the rates due from Northern Ireland Water were highlighted. Most councils in Northern Ireland have experienced such swings in their local rates.

If there have been variations in the local rates, there will, no doubt, be variations in the regional rates that can be raised and built into the Budget. One of the elements driving that is the increasing provision for bad debt. Has the regional rates income to the Department of Finance and Personnel been updated as a result of the increasing levels of rates arrears and bad debt? Will the Minister confirm that the failure of DFP's Land and Property Services has resulted in increased levels of rates arrears and a subsequent requirement to increase rates levels because of bad debt?

That requirement comes at the worst possible time. Due to the credit crunch, debt levels have increased, and there is less money to pay the rates arrears that have been issued. I suspect that some of the failure has been due to the decision of Land and Property Services not to inspect properties that were listed as vacant. That meant that rates for occupied properties were not being paid.

Rates arrears have increased significantly over the past number of years. It was estimated that rates arrears in March 2005 were £35 million; £48 million in March 2006; £88 million in March 2007; and £130 million in March 2008. I acknowledge that the estimate for March 2008 was reduced to around £80 million at the time of the Public Accounts Committee's hearing into rates collection, but it remains a significant amount of arrears. I have no doubt that that will contribute to increasing levels of bad debt.

Can the Minister advise the House of what changes, if any, he has made to the Budget as a result of the increased levels of bad debt? That is an important issue.

The Larne railway line, unlike other rail services in Northern Ireland, was not allocated new trains. The new trains on the Bangor and Portadown lines have seen a huge increase in passengers and, with that increased use, come associated environmental benefits. It is disappointing that the contracts for the new trains on the Larne line have not been announced. I want an assurance that that will happen and that no changes in the Budget will delay that process, because commuters who use the Larne line are experiencing a poorer quality of service.

Mr Hamilton: It is good to see Mr Beggs back on the finance brief — perhaps Mr McNarry has been demoted from that for the second time this year. Mr Beggs said that he does not want undue delay in budgets being spent, but can he balance that comment

with comments that his colleagues have made, calling for a complete rewriting of the Budget and the Programme for Government, which would inevitably lead to delay and procrastination? To be fair to the Member, he has not made such a comment, but I would like to know how he can reconcile those two positions.

Mr Beggs: The Member should understand that improvements to the rail service in east Antrim will contribute to a wide range of areas, including the economy of Northern Ireland, the environment, and the quality of life of the commuters from that area. Mr Hamilton should reflect on some of the comments that have been made by some of his own colleagues. In yesterday's Official Report, I note that, when referring to failures in the roads structure in Northern Ireland and the need to improve maintenance, Jim Wells indicated that:

“The monitoring-round route will no longer suffice”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 38, p45, col 1*].

Some of the Member's colleagues are referring to a range of other issues and saying that monitoring is not sufficient. I am assuming, therefore, that not only are they dissatisfied with the monitoring round but that they must want other wider revisions.

Most people would recognise that there has been quite a change in the economic situation in the course of the last year. Is it wise to keep on paddling the canoe without looking to see what changes should be made?

Mr Hamilton: The Member has spelt it out very clearly that, moving forward, his party's approach to the Budget is characterised by cuts. Will he not accept that —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should direct his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Hamilton: Sorry, Mr Speaker. Through the Chair, will the Member not accept that calling for more money for rail or anything else that he desires will require a cut being made somewhere else? Perhaps the Member could outline where, precisely, the money will come from for some of the things that he is talking about and, indeed, some of the other stuff that he may want to talk about. Is the Member suggesting that those cuts are made to existing budget lines?

Mr Beggs: I hope that the Member will examine what I have said very closely. He is the only person who is talking about and using the word “cuts” repeatedly. I have been advised that the tender for the Larne train line has been out for some time and is due to be signed at any moment. I am concerned that the signing of that has been delayed and am starting to wonder whether, perhaps, DFP has issued instructions to delay such significant expenditure on something that will have a wide range of economic and environmental

benefits. The trains are not due until 2011, but I am concerned that, as yet, there has been no announcement about the signing of the contract.

Therefore, when discussing the issue of the trains, I am not talking about cuts, nor do I want money to be further advanced. I simply want the rail programme to be continued, and I am concerned that there may have been delays, perhaps as a result of instructions issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Therefore, it would be helpful if the Minister could clear up that matter. I hope that the contract for the Larne train line, which will ultimately require DFP approval because of the significant sums involved, gets approval and that we will hear good news about that before long.

Following on from a comment that I made in response to this morning's statement on the North/South Ministerial Council, I would also welcome an assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that funding will be available to improve the A8, the Larne to Belfast road, which is a key transport corridor for all of Northern Ireland as it links to the shortest ro-ro ferry route across the Irish Sea, from Larne to Cairnryan. Will the Minister assure us that the money for that improvement will continue? Has there been any indication of delays on that project, or is it continuing with its programme? It is one thing to say that the money for that will come, but I want to know whether there has been any indication of when it will come.

Similarly, there is bottleneck on the A2 at Greenisland, where there is a very narrow section of road that is funnelling traffic to and from Belfast. Commuters travelling from Carrickfergus to Belfast have to go through that funnel, which then widens out again to four lanes. Will the Minister indicate whether any long-term funding is available to improve that key transport corridor?

Recently, I have visited health centres in my constituency, in Larne and Carrickfergus. I am well aware of the need to replace those ageing primary-care centres, which were built in a different era. Patients should not have to be treated in cramped conditions, nor should health centres need to have buckets to collect water from leaking roofs. We should not be using facilities one might more commonly expect to find in Third World countries. I hope that additional funds will be available to enable primary care facilities in my constituency to be upgraded.

12.30 pm

It should be borne in mind that there is no acute hospital in the East Antrim constituency. I am not even pressing for a new acute hospital. I am simply asking for a decent health centre. GPs and other allied health services should not have to work in cramped conditions, or conditions that could inhibit their ability

to treat patients, and, hopefully, take the pressure off our acute hospital services.

There has been a long delay in rebuilding a primary school in Island Magee. Indeed, over £1 million has been spent on purchasing the land. I hope to hear shortly when the children of Island Magee will be able to attend their own local school, and not have to be taught in poor conditions. There was an agreed amalgamation of three schools, and that is now down to two schools. I hope that when schools co-operate and agree in such a way, which is a difficult process, the Department of Education and the Finance Minister will ensure that money will be available to facilitate such change.

Again, in the Carrickfergus area, Woodburn Primary School —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member, and the whole House, that we are debating the Budget Bill; not constituency issues.

Mr Beggs: I hope that within the Budget Bill, and the allocation for education, that there will be sufficient money available to enable improvements to primary schools such as the primary school in Island Magee and Woodburn Primary School.

Woodburn Primary School is an older building, and it continues to provide quality education. However, the quality of education would be enhanced greatly if that older building were upgraded, meaning that many of the children would not have to be taught in mobile classrooms. Most mobile classrooms rely on electric heating. How many people use electricity to heat their homes? It is one of the most expensive forms of heating. Money that should be directed toward teaching children and improving their education is being wasted. Also, the use of electricity for heating is not environmentally friendly. There is the need for an upgraded building with an efficient heating system.

It is important that constituencies such as East Antrim are not overlooked in the Budget. For too long, we have heard people in the west complain about a lack of provision. I can assure them that there is a need for increased provision in the east, and in East Antrim.

As regards the social development budget, Members may not be aware that there is a need for additional funding for the warm homes scheme to ensure its sufficient uptake throughout the constituency. There is a concern that there may not be sufficient funds available to meet the needs. Recent figures from the Northern Ireland housing conditions survey showed that parts of Larne, which in my constituency, are the second worst as regards fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. Clearly, there is a need for additional investment in the warm homes scheme to provide more efficient buildings and to ensure that people do not have to face the choice of eating or heating.

I have concerns with the Budget. I am aware that some areas have a need for different allocations, and some money in the Budget could be diverted to my constituency, as it has genuine needs. There must be equality to ensure that parts of the east receive appropriate funding — just as parts of the west do.

Mr 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 next Member called to speak will be Declan O’Loan.

The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr O’Loan: This debate is on the Budget Bill, which is, of course, about money, but it is also about much more than money. We are making very basic decisions about how we best use our resources. Some people are critical of the term “social engineering”, but all Members are involved in social engineering. We are trying to engineer or create a better society by using the resources at our disposal, of which financial resources are a very big part.

Turning to the broader picture of what we are doing with our money, I will address a couple of themes or issues that cause me concern. The first is what I regard as a tendency among some in the Assembly to become very inward-looking and protectionist in outlook. The Minister of the Environment, Mr Wilson, recently recommended that preference be given to employing local workers. Those comments worried me, and many others, a great deal.

I will focus on only the protectionist aspects of those remarks. We benefit greatly from the fact that our citizens can move freely throughout Europe and the world. The EU is based on the principle of the free movement of capital, goods and labour, and it has been a very powerful vehicle for driving up our economic advantage throughout the EU. Our future must be very firmly located there.

The second issue arose initially from comments that the First Minister made in his new year’s speech. He expressed considerable scepticism about the North/South Ministerial Council, and that view was reflected in a motion that was later tabled in the Assembly. That is what I mean when I say that it appears that certain Members are developing inward-looking tendencies. There is no future for this Assembly or for Northern Ireland if we take that approach.

When I hear unionist Members express such views, I have great fears — fears in the economic sense, but, equally, in the social and political sense. In economic terms, Northern Ireland has no future other than to throw itself open to the world and to compete in the global marketplace. If we attempt to do the opposite and close in on ourselves and develop a protectionist stance, we will be sunk in an economic mire. The only way to better the economic future for the people who depend on us here is to open ourselves up to all available routes. On this island of Ireland, the North/South aspect of our economy is vital, and I want to hear all Members make that clear when outlining their position.

I find it very surprising that the First Minister made such a comment in his new year statement. The First Minister has a duty to be the First Minister for all of us. He is my First Minister as much as he is the First

Minister for those who sit on the DUP Benches. For him to use his new year message to launch an assault on a fundamental of the Good Friday Agreement was extraordinary and most unfortunate. The Good Friday Agreement was a complex piece of architecture, designed to deal with a very difficult political problem here. Anything that attempts to undermine its very foundations should be regarded with extreme concern, and I want to express that concern very strongly today.

The third issue that I want to address is sustainability. We live in a time when the resources of this planet are under severe pressure, which must be one of the fundamental contextual issues that we have in mind when developing all of our policies. Therefore, again, I have serious concerns when I hear the Minister of the Environment, Mr Sammy Wilson, expressing his total belief that changes in climate have no origin in the activities of human beings.

When any issue comes in front of me, I look for evidence — it is correct that we all do that. Climate change is a complex matter; no one has an all-embracing theory on the issue or can create a model that explains all the great and many climate changes that have taken place over the centuries.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Interested as I am in the issues that the Member raises, will he make his comments relevant to the debate on the Budget Bill?

Mr O'Loan: If the Member had been present at the start of my speech, he would have heard me outline the relevance of my comments to the Budget — I will not repeat myself.

Any right-thinking person has to take seriously the weight of evidence, presented by respected scientists in the field, that reaches the conclusion that man is having a significant effect on climate change. As a minimum, any serious policy-maker must adopt an extremely cautious approach. When a risk analysis is carried out, the probability of an event occurring and the consequences of that are examined. If an event is found to be in the quadrant of high probability and has serious consequences, serious policy-makers must take that into consideration. The First Minister said that that was the stance of the Democratic Unionist Party and —

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development come to the House and make a statement on her Department's handling of the farm modernisation scheme. There is speculation that the application process for the scheme does not comply with legal requirements, which has implications for the standing of the Assembly and the Executive.

The Minister must come to the House and explain fully her insistence on an application process that led to farmers camping outside departmental offices for up to 48 hours, only for its legality to be brought into

question. The matter goes to the heart of the Department and the Minister's ability to run her Department properly. As the Minister is accountable to the House, she ought to come here to explain the situation. The issue is so serious that, if the speculation is correct, it should lead to ministerial resignation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the House has heard the Member's point and that the Minister will take note.

Mr Elliott: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to outline some of the issues that were raised by an adviser to the EU Agriculture Commissioner on the seriousness of the situation. He said that —

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

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Are you sure that it is a point of order?

Dr Farry: It most definitely is.

Will you provide guidance to the House on when points of order should be raised? I note that the points made by Rev McCrea, though they may be relevant, came during a Member's speech on the Budget Bill. If the Member wanted to make a comment that was relevant to the speech that was being made, I can understand why he was making it at that point. However, would that type of point of order not better be made during the break between debates, rather than during the middle of a Member's speech?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member will appreciate fully that, at times, it is very difficult to know what a Member is going to say. However, I have noted what Dr Farry has said. I am sorry for the inconvenience, Mr O'Loan, please continue with your speech on the Budget Bill.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you. I am very aware of the importance of the issue — indeed, a Member from my party tabled a private notice question in relation to it this morning. However, I am surprised that Mr McCrea felt it necessary to introduce a point of order in the middle of my speech, which will be finished in the next few minutes. However, he did so, and you had no choice but to take it.

I was referring to the stance that the First Minister took on the issue when he said that his party would be bringing to the Executive what was outlined in its manifesto, which is an absolute and proper commitment to address climate change. However, I do not see how he can be consistent in saying that he will bring that manifesto pledge to the Executive when a fellow Member of the Executive, from his own party, is taking a diametrically opposed stance.

Some Shakespearean plays feature characters that are known as fools, and they are tolerated because they often utter words of wisdom, but I do not think that that is what we are seeing in this particular case.

This matter is important because of the signal it sends to our community regarding the response we are seeking from people, as individuals, in addressing climate change. It is also very important when we are considering Executive policies that have a bearing on that, for example, in relation to the conservation of energy, and in the message that we are giving to the business sector with regard to whether we want them to get involved in renewable energy technologies.

All of those matters are the daily diet of discussion at the Executive table and at Assembly Committee meetings, and there cannot be two messages coming from the Executive on this issue. In my opinion, the Minister of the Environment's position on the issue is not tenable, and, bearing in mind what the First Minister has said, his position is not tenable either.

Dr Farry: I support the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, albeit that my support is reluctant support. However, I appreciate the importance of the legislation being passed. As the opposition in this House, and although we have major concerns about the nature of current and future spending plans, we take our responsibilities as public representatives in Northern Ireland extremely seriously, and we acknowledge the importance of having some form of legal framework in place that will allow Departments to spend money from the beginning of the new financial year.

I dare to suggest that there is an important debate to be had about the way forward and about whether revisions need to be made to the Budget. We are not going to have a separate Budget statement this year, because a three-year Budget has been agreed by the Executive, and we respect that opinion. Therefore, any changes that are to be made on the Floor of the Chamber will be best made in relation to the second Budget Bill, which will be introduced in June. At that stage, we will be in a better position, and we will have more scope and time to consider whether a different way forward is feasible.

The challenge today is to ensure that the funds are in place to allow Departments to spend the money that they have in order to fulfil their statutory functions. Every Member should be aware of that responsibility. This is not the time for Members to produce gimmicks or vote against motions and leave people short of resources. That is not the responsible way forward.

2.15pm

The Alliance Party has had major differences with the Executive over some of what they were doing. Although I fully acknowledge and welcome the commitment that the Executive have given to prioritising the economy, I dispute how genuine that is in practice.

I would, perhaps, place a difference emphasis on where and how resources are deployed to ensure that we get the maximum benefit for the greater good in Northern Ireland in encouraging economic growth and closing the productivity gap with the UK, the Republic of Ireland and other countries in Europe. However, such differences will arise, and I hope that, in a democratic Chamber, different points of view can be respected.

I wish to comment on the subject of the £1.1 billion black hole that is claimed to exist in the Budget. That sensationalist headline figure is in danger of distracting us from serious issues that need to be addressed, and it cheapens an important debate that needs to take place. I acknowledge that the £1.1 billion gap, which exists on paper, is, at this stage, essentially a theoretical gap between the potential claims of all Departments for new resources, and what will potentially be surrendered by Departments. As time moves on, that gap will, of course, close as needs are addressed, requests are taken off the table or further money is surrendered. There does seem to be a funding gap, though it is probably in the region of £370 million, based on the evidence of previous years' monitoring rounds.

I must add a warning: we need to be sensitive. As a result of the economic downturn, we may be in a *sui generis* situation, where normal rules and past assumptions may not necessarily apply in the current context, and we could easily be knocked off course by events over which the Assembly has little control. There is a genuine issue about the ability of the Executive to meet demands. However, we should move away from talking about it as a £1.1 billion gap, never mind the term "black hole". As we know from astrophysics, no light ever comes out of a black hole: that is why it is black.

My other concern is about what Departments are doing to address the economic downturn. In the past, I have criticised the Finance Minister over his responsibilities. However, his responsibilities do not cover the entire Executive: the Finance Minister is a ringmaster, who holds the ring between competing demands of Departments. However, Departments themselves should be taking action. What strikes me about many of the claims that were made about the Budget stocktake was how few of those calls for additional money were directly linked to the economic downturn. I find that hard to grasp.

To my mind, the economic downturn is the number one issue for the electorate across Northern Ireland, which desires to see the Executive mobilise their resources to deal with the situation. There does not seem to be much evidence of hunger and creativity coming through from Departments in trying to address those needs. The resources available are limited, and that is an issue. However, if the Departments can take a hard look at what they are doing and conclude that some of their projects, which may have been relevant a

year ago, are not now to be given the same priority and that there are other things that they could do to address the economic downturn, I would look forward to Departments bringing forward such proposals.

The only real evidence of an economic downturn that we have so far seen in the stocktake figures are the loss in revenue from Departments, as asset sales do not realise the income expected. I am concerned about how seriously some Departments are taking the fact that we are in an economic downturn, because much of what they are doing seems to be “business as usual”.

Another point I want to make relates to the status of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that point in his winding-up speech. The Budget sets out the net figures for capital spend: the investment strategy, the gross figures. When both documents were being finalised, certain assumptions were made with respect to asset-realisation and other sources of income.

As a result of the economic downturn, those assumptions have been knocked off course. The investment strategy and the Budget have been knocked out of sync by events. The Budget included the net figure of £1.4 billion for capital spend this year; at the same time, the investment strategy included the gross figure of £1.8 billion for expenditure. Lost income means that we are back at £1.4 billion; therefore, the net figure has become the gross figure.

Similarly, the investment strategy provided for £3.6 billion to be spent over the next two financial years; however, the Budget net figures set aside only £2.7 billion in resources. Perhaps some income will allow us to bring that figure above the £3 billion mark; however, we are in the realm of intangibles. The Minister talked about the expectation of spending approximately £3 billion over the next two financial years; I encourage him to try to give a bit more certainty, if he can, as to the Executive’s longer-term capital spending plans for the remainder of the budgetary period. It goes without saying that it is important that we get as much capital spend and as many jobs involved as possible.

I asked Sinn Féin Members to give way during some of their comments. Fra McCann talked about the death of capitalism. Despite views in the Chamber to the contrary, I believe in the free market as the most efficient way of allocating resources in a society and ensuring the maximum good for everyone. The lessons of the past few years have shown that the global economy and the capital system need reformed and increased regulation; however, I still think that it remains at the core of our thinking in respect of the Budget.

Sinn Féin may well have its own ideological approach when it comes to allocating resources. It produced a long list of reasons for its dissatisfaction, and the areas that the Budget did not address, such as social housing,

healthcare, and education. I sympathise with a lot of that. However, Sinn Féin is coequal in the Executive, and I have to ask where its fingerprints on the Budget and the Programme for Government are. I cannot see them. Perhaps someone can answer that at some stage.

Mr Weir: I think that the Member will acknowledge that some Members opposite would be very good at entering a scene and not leaving fingerprints.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Dr Farry: I will not add to the confusion on that point.

Clearly there is a problem about what is happening with health spending in Northern Ireland, and there are two competing explanations as to why that is. One is that efficiency savings are not being properly applied by the Minister and, instead, we have a situation in which quite simplistic cuts in the level of service are taking place. The other is that the health budget was inadequate to begin with. There is a large grain of truth in both explanations and both are valid as flip sides of the same coin. In my mind, efficiency savings are about making changes to policies and practices, moving resources from outmoded ways of doing things, and redirecting them to more efficient and effective ways of addressing new services and demands that might be entering the system.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s proposal to cut 700 nurses from front line services is anything but an efficiency cut? Rather, it is the decimation of the nursing profession at a time when we need more nurses, not less.

Dr Farry: Yes, I agree fully with my colleague; there is no job more front line than that of a nurse.

Mr Cobain: What about resources?

Dr Farry: I will return to Fred Cobain’s point about resources.

Another aspect is the underfunding of the Health Service in Northern Ireland. I acknowledge that the figures show that around 48% of the total Budget is spent on health and that some 51% of new spending is going to health. Those are simple facts, and I will not argue with them. However, notwithstanding those figures, health spending in Northern Ireland is not keeping up with the level of health spending elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The health budget has been flatlining over the past few years. That divergence has not been historical; it is much more recent than that, and devolution has played a large part in taking decisions that have knocked us off course.

Health spending is becoming much more difficult because of more expensive drugs and technologies, and because people are living longer, which is to be welcomed. In Northern Ireland, those figures look

dramatic because we have a less broad range of functions than a national Government have. The higher rates of morbidity in Northern Ireland mean that spending per head must be higher than that in, for example, England or Wales.

Mr Hamilton: I take the Member's points, and he is making a valuable contribution to the debate in accepting the fact that record levels of investment have been made in health. I am sure that he will note, as I do, that investment in the Health Service in Northern Ireland has more than doubled over the past decade. Will he agree that some of the health inequalities that he and his colleague Mr McCarthy have talked about — which Members will unanimously agree are problems — will be detrimentally affected by some of the cuts that are being forced through by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and would be made worse if some of the Minister's colleagues got their way to take yet further money from that budget?

Dr Farry: I agree with the Member, but that is only one part of the equation. The DUP opposed the creation of a separate public health body for Northern Ireland on the basis of cost saving. The Member's argument was that that would be done more efficiently by being incorporated into an existing body. Other people think that a separate body with a particular focus on public health and preventive health provision might be better placed to reduce inequalities and include other issues regarding social deprivation and other inequalities in society. As a consequence, that would bring an opportunity to lower costs on overall health spending per capita. There are different perspectives on how that could be done.

There are two challenges facing health. The first is to get the efficiency savings correct and to ensure that they are not, in fact, cuts. I fully support efficiency savings; I understand that they have to happen and that they are part and parcel of modern budgeting. An efficiency saving of 3% year-on-year is moderate and modest compared with the savings that many private organisations would be asked to make when managing their own funds.

The second challenge concerns the flatlining of the health budget. Notwithstanding the unprecedented levels of investment, the rest of the United Kingdom has had equally unprecedented levels of investment. It is moving ahead of us, and we are £200 million or £300 million short of where we need to be by 2011.

Declan O'Loan brought up the issue of the green economy. I will not go into a similar preamble on the background to climate change, but I will mention the economic and financial arguments on the issue. Mr O'Loan made some important points. Climate change will involve a cost of compliance. Investments will have to be made in order to rebalance the economy to

deal with the realities of climate change. All societies around the world will have to do that, and we cannot stick our head in the sand and pretend that we are different. A debate is to be had about when those costs are to be incurred. I suggest that the longer those changes are delayed, the more expensive they will be for future generations.

Equally, in the context of an economic downturn, when money has to be spent to stimulate the economy, there is an opportunity and an incentive to direct resources to those types of investments. That would fund the changes that have to happen at the same time as stimulating the economy, and that makes much economic sense.

There are job opportunities from energy-efficiency installation, which may be mentioned in the forthcoming debate on the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill, and the development of renewable technology. The cost of energy is perhaps the biggest single barrier to households and, in particular, to the business sector in Northern Ireland to competing with other jurisdictions.

Therefore, there are very direct economic and pro-business arguments for coming to terms with renewable-energy technology.

I was slightly concerned that the Finance Minister said yesterday, at the end of his speech, that he felt that market forces alone would be sufficient to drive the green revolution. I urge him to rethink that. The private sector has an important role to play, but the public sector also has an important role in driving forward the green agenda by pump-priming.

2.30 pm

The Executive have their differences on that point. I agree with Mr O'Loan that a common answer must be found. I asked questions of the Environment Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on the same day, about the potential for the green economy. The Environment Minister rubbished the whole notion. He declared that it would involve money that Northern Ireland need not spend, and that that would be money down the tubes that could be better spent. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister recognised the importance of investing in the development of green technologies. I fully support that. There is a lot of potential on both parts of this island in that respect.

My reply to Sammy Wilson is that such investment follows the logic of double glazing. Double glazing costs money, but it saves money, in the long run, by cutting heating costs. Therefore, the economic logic behind the changes is important.

The Executive face the challenge of coming to terms more fully with that concept. Even this morning, when he reported on the North/South Ministerial

Council, the deputy First Minister acknowledged the potential of renewable-energy development. However, there seems to be no sense of better co-ordination between both jurisdictions on the island in relation to their renewable policies and obligations to try to create a common market. That stance is regrettable. I am not making a political point about better co-operation on the island — it is a comment on the link between Northern Ireland's and the Republic's economic and environmental requirements. There is a real challenge in pulling those elements together.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I noted with interest Stephen Farry's comments in defence of capitalism and the free market. Given that the lack of regulation in banking and financial systems across the world got us into the present mess, I see that capitalism and the free market really works.

Dr Farry: Will the Member point to any socialist country that has been more successful than one with a free market?

Ms J McCann: I could point to a lot of them, but I am not getting into that debate now. I can take that argument up with Stephen Farry any time that he likes.

Mr McCartney: Can any Member in the House point to a better Health Service than Cuba's? *[Interruption.]*

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: Hold on, Dr Farry talked for 15 minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker. May other Members have a chance, please? I totally agree with my colleague Mr McCartney.

To return to the debate —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: For goodness sake.

Mr Hamilton: Is the Member aware of many countries that deny political and religious rights more than Cuba does?

Ms J McCann: Actually, there are people who say that Ireland denies some people's human and religious rights. I am talking about the North of Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Sorry, will the Member please sit down. I believe that the debate has gone off the subject of the Budget, which is what Members are supposed to be debating. The Member may carry on.

Ms J McCann: To return to the subject in question, it is unfortunate that the debate on the Budget is taking place in the shadow of the economic downturn that many families and businesses face at present. The increase in unemployment has spiralled even more

people into financial difficulties. Members have already commented on that.

I believe that Simon Hamilton may have been the Member who said, earlier, that the cost of fuel was coming down. If asked, families who use electricity and gas in their homes will tell you that they are still paying high fuel prices. That can still be quite a squeeze on people's budgets. Families find it difficult to meet all those costs.

There is also danger that people will lose their homes as they find it increasingly difficult to keep up their mortgage repayments. As recently as Friday 13 February, there were reports of increased home repossessions. I am sure that everyone in the House is worried about that. It is worth taking a reality check and remembering that many families in our communities live in poverty and have daily difficulties.

The Executive's Programme for Government still presents an opportunity to deliver on their key priorities of tackling poverty by targeting investment and public procurement in order to build a strong economy in which social disadvantage can be tackled. Guideline requirements are built into every project so that the Executive can deliver that change on the ground. It is important that that be driven forward.

The Assembly's commitment to deal with discrimination and disadvantage is at the crux of the opportunity to overcome what is morally and economically unsustainable. For example, ways to challenge those patterns of disadvantage include examination of how all public-procurement expenditure can integrate economic and social requirements, along with ring-fencing projects that impact directly on discrimination and poverty. In order to achieve that, the Assembly must think outside the box.

As was mentioned during the debate on Monday 16 February, the Assembly must work within the Budget. That must be understood. Therefore, good housekeeping is necessary. I will repeat what I said during that debate: the Assembly must deliver the £150 fuel payment to people as soon as possible so that they can meet their fuel costs. The Assembly has already approved the payment; however, it must ensure that the money goes into people's hands.

As for the huge budget for procurement, the Assembly must agree on measures, such as local-labour clauses, to ensure that equality conditions are met. Companies that receive public-procurement contracts must meet base conditions, such as to offer good wages and employment of apprentices and to contribute to local economic welfare and growth. That will help people who are in social need and will also help the economy to grow.

Therefore, during the current period of economic uncertainty, it is important that local businesses have

access to all the new financial guarantee schemes that the British Government have introduced as part of the bail-out for banks. That will ensure that those businesses have access to working capital and the cash flow that they need. It is also important that those businesses be kept open because many people have put a lot of money into them, particularly smaller, local family businesses. They also employ people for whom job security is important.

It is clear that as part of its response to the current economic downturn, the Assembly must take new action in order to create a strong and vibrant economy. Competitive fiscal incentives must be introduced alongside other measures in order to encourage investment and growth. That need not focus solely on foreign direct investment, but on local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and social-economy enterprises.

Comments were made earlier in the debate — for example, by the previous Member to speak, Stephen Farry — to the effect that in the current climate, there is a strong need for all-island, all-Ireland co-operation among organisations such as Invest NI, Intertrade Ireland and the Industrial Development Agency in order to ensure that there is networking and that the channel of co-operation is kept open for all SMEs and social-economy enterprises throughout the entire island of Ireland. It is important that matters are considered on an all-island basis, not just in a North/South capacity. That can be beneficial only if it opens doors to businesses in the North as well as in the South and creates new opportunities for all.

Social and affordable housing has also been debated. There has been much contentious debate on that matter in the Chamber. There is genuine concern about the Budget's ability to meet targets for social and affordable housing and allocations for housing programmes.

Although the housing market has changed dramatically — particularly in respect of sales — there is still a big need for social and affordable housing; people need homes. The Assembly needs to send out a clear message that we are examining those issues and are concerned about those issues. In the past year, many people have lost their homes due to the economic downturn. Perhaps they have lost their jobs and cannot keep up with mortgage repayments and are now on the social-housing list. That list is getting longer. Therefore, we must afford people the opportunity to express their concerns and to bring those concerns to the Assembly.

Debt has become another major source of concern, particularly for people who find themselves in a situation that they were not in 18 months ago. Many people need specialist debt advice in order to get themselves out of that debt. Debt-advice workers need to be more accessible. A lot of organisations and people are doing a good job and delivering debt advice, but

there are not enough. There should be more specialist debt-advice services across the North of Ireland based in local communities. I would hope that that is an issue that we could examine and drive forward.

We still have an opportunity to deliver on the important issues of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity by actively and effectively challenging existing patterns of social and economic disadvantage and by using any future increased prosperity to tackle ongoing poverty. We must remember that some people were already living in poverty when the Programme for Government was put together, even before this economic downturn. The Programme for Government offers the opportunity to drive forward the programmes needed to tackle the problems that I have outlined.

The priorities of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy are growing the economy and using the increased prosperity and economic growth to tackle existing patterns of social disadvantage. We must take the opportunity — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. There is another debate going on here. I ask Members to allow the Member to speak.

Ms J McCann: We can push forward with the Programme for Government. As was said here yesterday, the Assembly and the Executive must send out a clear message of leadership. Members do, obviously, have their own areas of concerns. However, none of us should use debates on issues that are of major concern to the people as an opportunity for party politicking. Indeed, some debates turn into what I can only describe as theatre.

Mr Weir: No one would pay to see it, though.

Ms J McCann: Well, probably not. Most Members are concerned about the serious issues that I have outlined. We must send out a clear message that we are united in trying to tackle those problems.

Mr Wells: It is a bit rich of the Member for West Belfast to condemn the Member for North Down for speaking for 14 minutes when she spoke for 14 minutes and 34 seconds. It is a case of do as I say, not as I do.

Mr Brolly: She was misleading the House. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: I hope that my points will be succinct, rather than rambling throughout all of Northern Ireland.

I want to emphasise that the Hansard report stated that I was speaking in yesterday's debate on behalf of the Committee for Regional Development; I was not. I was speaking as a member of the Committee for Regional Development. I want to clarify that in case the writs start to fly from room 401. However, it is important that the regional development aspect is broadcast in this debate.

Yesterday, I mentioned the problem with the structural maintenance of roads. Today, I will speak on the vexed issue of our water quality and sewage disposal; someone has to do it.

MLAs appreciate that major structural projects have been carried out. Funding has been successfully bid for and spent on major capital projects such as new sewage treatment works in north Down, Portrush, east Antrim, and so on. However, those projects only progressed because Friends of the Earth took a judicial review against the direct rule Government for their failure to meet EC directives on bathing water and water quality. Although it would be churlish not to recognise the achievements, we have a legacy of scores of inadequate and poorly performing smaller sewage treatment works, particularly in rural areas. It is vital to tackle that situation before it runs out of control.

2.45 pm

Although it is slightly parochial, I want to outline the situation in Newcastle in my constituency. That large town, which is one of the most important centres of population in south Down, has consistently failed almost every European directive. Dundrum Bay has failed to meet the requirements of the urban waste water treatment directive, the bathing water directive, and has failed to meet the Blue Flag standard. It is becoming an embarrassment to our premier tourist resort that the sewage treatment works — which I remember opening about 20 years ago — are totally inadequate and urgently need funding for a complete rebuild.

A battle is ongoing between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Northern Ireland Water. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency says that bathing water quality in Dundrum Bay and Newcastle is of such a low standard that all future connections to that system must stop and that no further high-density development can progress in Newcastle until the issue is resolved and money to provide a new sewage treatment works is found. Northern Ireland Water says that there is no problem at all and that it can fill its tanks, which have plenty of room. It says that it will continue to manage water that gushes through the system. That is fine. However, that water brings *E.coli* into the bay, and the seawater is extremely polluted. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency should win that argument, and there should be no further development until the funding is found.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel is very clever and has an excellent response to that point, he will ask what budget I propose to cut in order to fund adequate provision for sewage treatment works. That is one of the cleverest arguments ever made in the House, and is difficult to argue against. He will then ask whether I propose to cut the health budget, the education budget

or funding for other vital services in order to achieve that end.

I have a few suggestions about the source of the funding for the adequate sewage treatment system that the Province so urgently needs. The Committee for Regional Development noticed recently that Northern Ireland Water will pay the Department for Regional Development a £43 million dividend from its income this year. Therefore, money will return to Government coffers. During these difficult economic times, is it too radical to suggest that DRD does not accept that £43 million, but allows Northern Ireland Water to spend the money on infrastructure projects in respect of the sewage treatment system?

Furthermore, the Committee recently discussed the monitoring round, during which £25 million had to be found for an unavoidable cost, namely the re-designation of the status of Northern Ireland Water. The Committee had no way of avoiding that particular sleight of hand. Could the re-designation proposal have been postponed for a year to enable major upgrades of many sewage treatment works?

Tenders are coming in at a much more competitive level. I have heard that tenders for major capital infrastructure projects are at least 19% lower this year, compared with two years ago. The reason is clear: companies are so desperate for work in Northern Ireland that they make extremely low — some might say suicidal — bids to secure the work and to maintain cash flow. We can, perhaps, use that opportunity to invest more money in capital infrastructure for our water. It may be unfortunate for the companies but good news for the taxpayer.

Furthermore, given the savage cuts in interest rates during the past 18 months, the system must produce a windfall. As Members know, a large proportion of funding of water infrastructure is through debt.

Northern Ireland Water has the power to go to the open money markets and to obtain funding for capital projects through borrowings. I suspect that that money must be an awful lot cheaper now than it was 18 months ago. Perhaps this is a virtuous circle, and the ducks are in a row, as it were. Things are stacking up to enable a major leap forward in investment in the Province's water supply — particularly its disposal.

The good news, from an economic point of view, is that the multiplier effect of that could be quite significant, because as I said yesterday, over half the increase in net unemployment in Northern Ireland in the past calendar year occurred in the building sector. Any attempt to bring about a rapid turnaround in unemployment would have a long delay, except through construction, particularly through projects such as building small sewage treatment works and the structural maintenance of roads. People could literally be out on the ground

and working very quickly if investment were made in those sorts of projects.

I urge the Department for Regional Development, in conjunction with DFP, to examine ways in which we can get our builders back on the road — back into their white Transit vans and out along the road, building again. I spoke with one gentleman in my constituency the other night who had worked in the building trade for 38 years and had never had a day's enforced unemployment in his life. He is well into his 50s — there is nothing wrong with that — and he was finding it incredibly difficult emotionally to walk up the street to the social security office in Kilkeel to sign on for the first time in his life. He is perfectly entitled to do so, but the emotional impact of having to do that, having been the main breadwinner in the house, was breaking him up. I can understand that. I have only had to sign on once in my life, when the Assembly collapsed in 1986, so I know exactly what it is like. It did not help that a TV crew was there to film me doing it, but I know what those folk are going through.

There are a lot of hard-working, skilled people out there who would jump at the opportunity to work on a project such as the refurbishment of Ardglass sewage treatment works, or the facilities at Killough, Strangford, and all around the country, which are completely past their sell-by date.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister — sorry, will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I hope that you are being prophetic. The Minister would love to give way, but the obscure Back-Bencher will.

Mr McCarthy: You have been promoted.

Does the Member not think that what he has said is a contradiction in terms? He is calling on the Department to restrict the building of further developments in Newcastle, because of the inadequate sewage treatment works — and I fully understand that — but is there not a possibility that the problem could be acknowledged, yet the development could continue, with no one being allowed to use the development until the proper infrastructure and sewerage facilities are provided? In that way, the building could continue, thus providing employment to people such as the man whom the Member has been talking about who had to sign on. That has happened in other places.

Mr Wells: The Member has obviously been reading the 'Down Recorder', and has seen the sort of arguments that I have been making in the local press.

There are at least seven vacant building sites in Newcastle at the moment where not a single brick has been laid for six months. Unfortunately, there is no market for housing in South Down. The only people making money are those who are installing the steel

fences around vacant building sites. Even when sites have full planning permission — even if Northern Ireland Water were to allow them to connect, and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency were to approve that connection — no one is buying the houses. That is the reality. Perhaps in the eastern part of County Down, where folk are more affluent, houses are selling, but not in South Down.

The benefit of public infrastructure projects is that the money is there and the work can begin immediately. There is no requirement for a huge surge in market activity to enable a sewage treatment works to be repaired. Fortunately, there is no machine yet that can do that work. That work is not only capital intensive, but labour intensive.

If the present economic situation continues, some way will have to be found of getting thousands of men — they mostly are men — back into the white vans, because the knock-on effect of that on the community would be enormous. Even local garages are telling me that they were dependent on gangs of men coming into the cafe at 7.30 am to get their Ulster fry, buy their sandwiches and cigarettes and go back on the road. That market is drying up, and that is having a knock-on impact in the community. We need to think imaginatively.

At a meeting this morning with Northern Ireland Water, I made the point that it, and perhaps Roads Service, offer the best opportunity to get people back onto the road, paying their taxes and National Insurance, and back into the shops, hotels and pubs spending money. If we do not do that, we will be in grave difficulty.

Those are my views on the situation, but if we do not do something soon, I am concerned that the "green" image of Northern Ireland as a location for tourism that we like to portray will be somewhat tarnished by the fact that in some of our communities, that which is coming out of the sewers and into the sea, the rivers and Lough Neagh leaves an awful lot to be desired. Do not be kidded by the wonderful new facility at Donaghadee, which is designed to serve all of north Down. That is a great facility, but what about the 80 or 90 little units that if the EC were to examine them in more detail, would fail, left, right and centre?

Mr Cree: When the Programme for Government was introduced, the economy was, quite rightly, put at the forefront. However, things have changed dramatically since that time. The scale of the recession and the impact that it has had on public spending means that we must re-examine our programmes and targets. That view is shared by others; in yesterday's 'Belfast Telegraph', the economist John Simpson stated:

"The purported budget for 2009-10 is based on assumptions that have been invalidated."

John Armstrong of the Construction Employers' Federation also stated:

"Northern Ireland's economic position has changed dramatically over the last number of months. We believe the Executive needs to adjust its priorities to take account of this."

However —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: No. We have heard enough from the Member, and it did not add any value.

We have all heard from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that everything is fine, and that we should proceed full steam ahead. However, the target to create a minimum of 6,500 jobs, 85% of which will be above the Northern Ireland private-sector median wage, seems bizarre, given what we now know from the financial-services sector. When Invest Northern Ireland states that foreign direct investment leads are being particularly hard hit, when sales from its land bank, which funds growth, especially for locally owned businesses are down, and when sales in 2008-09 are estimated to be at least 80% down on last year, we should be re-prioritising existing resources in order to get the best return for existing Northern Ireland businesses. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has instead, however, announced an independent review of her Department, with the debilitating remit that it will only report back in the summer.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel has made many announcements over the past few weeks, outlining the steps that his Department and the Executive have taken to boost the economy and local businesses. Some of those announcements have been welcome and will be beneficial; others are old news and have been recycled. One of the key points that I wish to make today is that announcements are the easy bit; delivering on those announcements is what the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be judged on. Announcing a £1.4 billion investment in our infrastructure for this year is easy; delivering £1.4 billion is another story.

There is a severe lack of monitoring and evaluation when it comes to delivering on Programme for Government targets. That is also true when it comes to infrastructure investments and investments in the economy. In this morning's 'Belfast Telegraph', Nigel Smyth of the CBI states:

"Confidence will only be built if effective delivery takes place — regular monitoring and reporting progress is necessary to ensure results are being achieved, and to date this visibility has been lacking."

I want an assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that adequate reporting and evaluation will be put in place in order to make certain that the Executive are delivering. That should not take the form of facile statements made by the Minister, but of detailed reporting on investments made and projects

started. The ease with which announcements are made was highlighted again today when the Planning Service stated that there was no longer a backlog in planning applications. Despite that, it takes much longer to get anything approved here compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. We also know that 22 projects have been put on hold, which is unfortunate at this time, when we need as many works in progress as possible.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel must look again at rates relief for small businesses. Indigenous small businesses make up 98% of Northern Ireland commerce, and at this difficult time, it is right that the Minister should closely examine rates relief proposals, as the cost of doing business in Northern Ireland has increased considerably in recent years — a factor that is rendering small businesses vulnerable in these extremely difficult times.

3.00 pm

In addition, more strategic emphasis must be placed on attracting tourists to Northern Ireland. The strong euro is giving Northern Ireland a short-term advantage, but we are not making enough of that by having a joined-up approach and introducing packages to attract new tourists from Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and mainland Europe.

Mr Attwood: I concentrate my remarks on four Departments and on one wider point. I begin by commenting on the Department for Employment and Learning's budget line, which will be music to the ears of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As he is aware, in the December monitoring round, the Department for Employment and Learning returned more than £14 million to DFP in respect of — what one would presume to be — some critical programmes in general, and especially so at this time of economic downturn.

More than £14 million — in respect of programmes such as Jobskills, apprenticeships, Steps to Work, and New Deal — was returned to the Minister. Therefore, when the financial year is examined in totality, it will be seen that more than 15% of the Department for Employment and Learning's budget lines for those programmes has been returned to DFP in monitoring returns.

It raises serious questions about the Department's budget lines in general, when, only nine months into the financial year, more than £14 million is being returned through in-year monitoring for, what one would think would be, essential job-related programmes. Based on the unemployment figures increasing in May 2008, why is it that after nine months the uptake for some of the programmes is still lower than one might have anticipated during a time of economic downturn?

Last week, for example, the Committee for Employment and Learning received a briefing from departmental officials on the Steps to Work programme.

On the basis of the evidence and statistics given, it appeared that there has not been a major uptake of Steps to Work programmes at a time when one would expect people to be queuing to get additional skills and training to prepare them for work or get them back into work.

Further, I want to flag firmly to the Minister that although I have concerns about those budget lines and about how some of those programmes are working, there are many questions about how fit for purpose some of them are, and how they will make people better trained and better educated in the event that there is an economic upturn in the future.

I will also focus on the DETI budget line. As we know, during a time of economic downturn, one has to be able to position oneself for the far side of the recession. Part of the strategy for positioning Northern Ireland for a global upturn will involve the work of Invest Northern Ireland. Last week, each Member received a document from the employers' forum, Northern Ireland Manufacturing (NIM). Its comments on the work of Invest Northern Ireland are worthy of consideration by the House, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and, in particular, the Minister for Employment and Learning.

This is what NIM says:

"NIM appreciates the encouragement Invest NI gives to the manufacturing sector ... However too much attention has been directed by Invest NI towards IT and call centre employment and not enough towards broader industry. It has been too quick to dismiss much of manufacturing as 'sunset industries' not worthy of support ... There is good, sustainable, high value added niches to be exploited in all of our manufacturing industries, and this is where Invest NI should be active ... The merger of IDB and LEDU combined the weaknesses of both organisations, with SMEs being particularly adversely affected by the shift towards more bureaucratic decision-making. That Invest NI is not working for the broad middle strand of industry in Northern Ireland is apparent from analysis of its assistance. The trend is towards an ever fewer circle of recipients."

If that is what the manufacturing forum is saying, it should be determined whether those assertions about Invest Northern Ireland are true. If it is the case that we have to position ourselves for a global upturn, we should determine whether our various investment mechanisms — and those who can upgrade the work and skills of our various employers — are treated in a way that does not concentrate all resources in one or two sectors, but tries to sustain the manufacturing base in the North, small though it may be. I trust that, when this Budget Bill and policy in the near future are studied, what the manufacturing forum is saying will be taken on board.

I also want to make a point about the Budget situation generally. Stephen Farry said that "hunger and creativity" were needed to address the economic downturn. When it came to most of the Executive's conduct, he added that it was, too often, "business as usual". As the Minister is aware, the SDLP believes

that there needs to be a fundamental reassessment of the Budget. We advance that argument again today. We believe that that argument is backed up by evidence from industry and economists.

As I understand it, the front page of today's 'Belfast Telegraph' hints that the Executive should explore other avenues to determine how we can address the economic downturn. However, there is evidence far beyond what may be on the front page of the 'Belfast Telegraph'. Earlier, there was reference to the Construction Employers Federation (CEF). Last week, its managing director said that the federation wanted the Executive to adjust its priorities and redistribute revenue and capital funds into the building and maintenance of Northern Ireland's public infrastructure. He said:

"We believe that urgent and unprecedented intervention by the Northern Ireland executive is called for to safeguard the industry, its supply chain and the broader economy".

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

The managing director of the Construction Employers Federation concluded that:

"Investment in construction and maintenance of the public infrastructure is the quickest and most effective way to create employment and reverse the downturn."

That is the voice of the Construction Employers Federation and many other employment forums. It is also the voice of a growing number of economists. Why does the Minister not heed that advice?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for giving way. I hear his points about the construction industry and the need for investment in infrastructure. Right across the House, I think that there is agreement that investment in infrastructure is a sound and solid way of moving forward and trying to ease the pain that many are experiencing in these difficult economic times.

Having quoted the CEF, which emphasised the need for urgent and unprecedented intervention, and given that investment in major construction projects is not always as quick as one would wish, does the Member accept that investment in public-sector infrastructure projects has increased from approximately £600 million in 2003 to approximately £1.4 billion this year, which is a significant and unprecedented sum?

Mr Attwood: No one denies that investment in infrastructure is one way forward. However, there are two flaws in the Member's argument. First, simply earmarking money does not mean that it will flow to the construction industry and, secondly, the Construction Employers Federation and others go further than the Member. I repeat what it said:

"CEF is calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to urgently adjust its priorities and redistribute revenue and capital funds."

The Federation is not asking for infrastructure spending to be eased through the system. Given the intensity of the downturn, only by readjusting priorities will the Executive be able to alleviate the worst excesses of the downturn that people are facing, and those excesses were eloquently outlined by the Member for South Down Mr Wells.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a minute. If Members do not wish to listen to the SDLP, Jim Wells or the Construction Employers Federation, they should listen to the growing body of opinion from economists in the North. John Simpson, Mike Smith and Richard Ramsey are all on the same page. They are telling the Government that the downturn is so intense that they must change their mindset in order to turn the situation around.

If Members do not wish to listen to John Simpson, Mike Smith and Richard Ramsey, they should take note of the past year's increased unemployment figures. In the whole of Northern Ireland and Britain, Magherafelt suffered the single biggest increase, 189%; followed by Dungannon, 162%; and Cookstown, 150%. Although unemployment levels in the North are not as bad as those in other parts of Britain, it is experiencing the biggest increases.

Mr Hamilton: I notice that the Member did not mention that Northern Ireland has significantly lower unemployment rates than the Irish Republic. In response to the Member citing so many economists, I am tempted to repeat the old joke that economists have successfully predicted five of the last two recessions. Moreover, the apparent commonality among economists makes a lie of that other old joke: if economists were laid end to end, they would never reach a conclusion.

The Member mentioned the CEF's comments about reprioritising, which begs the question: if the Executive were to reprioritise — as his party and other parties are suggesting — and move money from one place to another, although I have heard about where that money should go, where should it come from?

Mr Attwood: I will answer that question. However, shooting the messenger does not provide an answer for people in Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon. Irrespective of economists' past form in anticipating economic downturns, if the message from them all is the same, should the DUP and Sinn Féin not listen to it? In coming months, the biggest increases in unemployment figures will not just be found in Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon, but in other areas in the North as well.

The Member properly asked what the SDLP would do to adjust priorities, and, in the near future, that is precisely what it will publish.

I will borrow from a phrase that his party colleague Lord Morrow made during a debate on the North/South Ministerial Council last week. He suggested that one would have to get up early in the morning to work out what the DUP is at. I suggest that the Minister of Finance and Personnel should get up early one of these coming days to see the SDLP's proposals. They will touch upon small, symbolic measures that will demonstrate that the Chamber and the Executive are capable of responding to the economic downturn. Furthermore, the SDLP will propose bigger measures that will, in some way, touch on what Mr Wells suggested, and, in fact, go much further.

3.15 pm

Mr Wells: I am worried that I am being quoted in defence of what the Member is saying. I did not suggest that money be taken from some Departments and given to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to spend on sewers and road maintenance and, in so doing, help kick-start the construction industry. I was suggesting ways in which DRD could use its existing budget imaginatively to achieve that. I was not asking for nurses to be made redundant or schools closed. There is an important distinction between reprioritising within an existing Department or moving money between Departments. I do not believe that I am guilty of committing any heresies this afternoon.

Mr Attwood: I concur with much of that, but the SDLP will go further than Mr Wells. Not only will our proposals look at in-Budget moneys and how they are spent, they will look at other sources of funding, additional to the Budget, that can be used as a means of dealing with the economic downturn.

When dealing with the economic downturn and examining new sources of funding and adjusting the Budget, we should borrow from comments relating to housing that, I understand, the Finance Minister made to the Minister for Social Development in a letter. Those comments have been reported in the media. He said that the loss of anticipated receipts from the sale of land and houses had a materially disproportionate and undesirable impact on the local construction industry.

Those are bold and brave words from the Finance Minister. Even from my limited political experience — and the Minister may well say that my words will prove that it is limited — I know that they are big words. It was brave of the Minister of Finance and Personnel to say that the loss of receipts has a materially disproportionate and undesirable impact on the local construction industry when talking about DSD's budget priorities — and those of other Departments.

One might say that that was all that the Minister could say. When one looks at the unemployment figures for Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon over the past year — and given that those are the areas

from which the builders who construct the houses in the east of the North drive in the early hours, as Jim Wells mentioned — one can understand that the Minister was declaring a self-evident truth. If it is not possible to build houses, there will be a materially disproportionate and undesirable impact on the local construction industry.

In making its proposals — and without being exclusive — the SDLP will be telling the Finance Minister that he has to live up to the statement that he made to the Minister for Social Development. His statement was contradicted by what happened in the December monitoring returns.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a minute. The Minister confirmed that statement in January when he allowed the Minister for Social Development to use moneys, which she would not otherwise have spent, for investment in social housing. I welcome that. Therefore, when we arrive at the situation in which we do what Mr Wells has suggested or concede to the arguments and evidence raised by the SDLP and others, the Finance Minister will be judged against that standard.

The building of more houses will do more than merely bring back into work those people in the white vans, to whom Jim Wells referred. It will also mean that social needs are being dealt with and that the health and stability of families and communities are being addressed by providing people with proper homes in which to rear their families.

Finally, I wish to raise some constituency matters and to look to the future. There is enormous resilience and quality across the constituency of West Belfast, from the Shankill Road to the Stewartstown Road and in every street in between. If that constituency is to reach its full potential, further develop and deepen its capacity, a number of key projects must be factored into the equation during the next spending round and beyond.

First and foremost is the issue of the new hospital for women and children at the Royal Victoria Hospital, which is, as yet, unresolved and may not be resolved until 2016, 2017 or later. Within the next couple of months, God willing, I will have a second reason to spend a little time in the maternity suite at the Royal Victoria Hospital —

A Member: You will be getting up earlier then.
[Laughter.]

Mr Attwood: I will send the Member a text message early in the morning if that helps.

Many Members have benefited from the services provided by the doctors, nurses and other staff in the maternity suite at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Their efforts — which, in my experience, are performed in the most adverse working conditions imaginable in any

hospital — demonstrate how their skills are greater than any of the problems that they face. Nonetheless, the staff of that hospital should not have to continue to face those problems. That issue must be dealt with earlier in the spending cycle than is currently planned.

If we are to create the fabric of life in West Belfast that has been so long denied to its citizens, we must recognise the proposals of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise Council for Glencairn, the Gaeltacht quarter, the Black Mountain and the regeneration of Andersonstown village, which all show that devolution and democracy delivers big time for communities in need. People in West Belfast will judge any future Budget or Minister of Finance and Personnel against some of those standards.

Mr Weir: As the last Member called to speak in the debate, other than the Minister, it may be appropriate to reflect on today's contributions. The debate has been, perhaps, more measured and less exciting than yesterday's debate. That is, in part, due to the lack of the dulcet tones of "Galileo" McNarry, whose magic penny appears to have been lost so he has been unable to fill the magic slot of the black hole. Today's debate was all the worse for the absence of an entertaining contribution from Mr McNarry.

Today's subject matter has ranged wildly, as one would expect in a Budget debate. Geographically, the debate has also ranged wildly: we went from Belfast to Havana at one stage; from Dublin to Colombia, which I believe was mentioned in passing by Mr O'Loan; and, in Mr Beggs's speech, we went from Carrickfergus to Larne. [Laughter.] Therefore, we have covered a great geographical base.

I commend some of the remarks that have come from an unusual source, in that Mr Farry stated that the Budget should be approached from a free-market viewpoint. Mr O'Loan also touched on that issue; I concur with his point that we should aim for Northern Ireland to compete in the global marketplace.

Although the Budget includes provision for record levels of front line delivery to the public — which I will discuss later — and record levels of capital investment, some Members opposite, as Mr Farry said, may be deluding themselves if they view the Budget as particularly socialist or left wing.

I have searched high and low, and I have not seen any reference to the collectivisation of farms or the elimination of the kulaks as a ruling class, or anything that touches on anything other than a right-of-centre, free-market-type Budget.

The Budget focuses on prioritising the economy and putting industrial development at the forefront. As was indicated by Mr Cree the honourable Member for North Down, it is right that the economy should be the number one priority. However, I was then a little surprised

when he said that the Budget should be reprioritised. If he believes that what is already at number one should remain at number one, I am not sure where the prioritisation comes in.

Then again, we had several unusual contributions from Mr Cree. He made a plea for a rates relief scheme for small businesses, even though the Finance Minister has announced already that that will be the case. Quite often in Westminster, a Minister may repeat various bits of good news. However, someone from a different party repeating the good news announced by another party tends to happen rarely.

The £1.4 billion that was mentioned is not a projected aim; it is £1.4 billion capital, which is being delivered. It is in the field, it is already happening and, as has been indicated, it is of a level that is unprecedented — to use the words of Mr Attwood. It more than doubles what was there five or six years ago. We have the greatest level of capital spend and investment in the history of Northern Ireland.

The calls for reprioritisation are flawed in two regards. First, I question the idea of the consensus behind the reprioritisation. Certain people may be casting a particular view that is not accurate. For example, mention was made of Richard Ramsey of the Ulster Bank. I will quote directly from an article that Mr Ramsey wrote in 'The Irish News' last week:

"The executive has probably passed the first test of the economic downturn - using its limited armoury to provide short-term support to the business community... This will be an extremely stern test but the executive's performance and determination to date provides some encouragement that it can be done."

Clearly, that is not an indication of reprioritisation, but a belief that, broadly speaking, the Executive are on track. It also mentions the fundamental —

Mr Attwood: I note what the Member has said. However, do these words sound familiar?

"This highlights the importance of stimulating the house-building sector, via social housing expenditure, and ensuring capital investment is both maximised and delivered".

Those are the words of the selfsame Mr Ramsey in another article in 'The Irish News' last week. Mr Ramsey said that those measures are required in the short term.

Mr Weir: I agree with that. That is why there has been the high level of investment, particularly towards the construction industry. As I highlighted before, we have seen the highest level of investment that has taken place. Therefore, to represent that as some sort of attack on the Executive does not bear close scrutiny.

Mr Wells introduced discussions on reprioritisation within DRD, and I am not in a position to judge whether the details of those suggestions hold water, if Members will forgive the pun. Leaving that aside, all other Members who spoke, the other exception being

Mr Attwood, who has promised some document in the future from the SDLP —

Mr P Maskey: The Member referred to the document that the SDLP are bringing forward. Mr Attwood talked about some "small, symbolic measures".

Does the Member agree that it certainly would have been better for the SDLP to present those proposals before the Budget Bill was debated rather than after? Is it not the case that the SDLP's response is too late?

3.30 pm

Mr Weir: In many ways, I would have preferred the detail to have been introduced in the debate, because it would have been useful to know whether the SDLP intends to cut public expenditure in various areas and whether it intends to squeeze the taxpayers more. Perhaps it would be wrong of me to prejudge whatever magnificent economic ideas the party will present in the near future. I am sure that they will be of Nobel Prize-winning standard.

I see the honourable Member for Lagan Valley Mr McCrea making what appears to be a slashing gesture, which brings me nicely to the Ulster Unionist Party's contribution to the debate. *[Laughter.]* Yet again, I am not quite sure where its members are coming from. Mr Cobain has, from a sedentary position, pressed the case for greater funds to be made available to tackle child poverty. Indeed, he had a look of horror on his face when Mr Farry talked about committing to the free market. Given the Ulster Unionist Party's connection with the Conservative Party, I wonder whether he was looking for a transfer. Unfortunately, I think that the Ulster Unionist Party's gain in Mr Farry may be the Alliance Party's loss in Mr Cobain.

We are not quite sure what the Ulster Unionist Party has in mind: is it the views of "Red" Fred, the need to reprioritise the economy, or David McNarry's magic penny? Perhaps it is the views of its partners in the Conservative Party who want to see more cuts than there are in an entire series of 'Casualty'.

The central problem is that the calls for reprioritisation of the Budget have been vague, with the exception of Mr Well's comments and whatever magic bullets might come from the SDLP in the near future. I am sure that all Members can point to very worthwhile projects, in either our own constituencies or across Northern Ireland, that we believe should receive more investment. However, with the exception of Mr Wells, there has been a deafening silence on how that reprioritisation would work — no one has identified what areas they want money to be taken from. If Members say that they want money for x, y and z, they must act responsibly and give some idea of where the money to cover that extra investment should come from.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I suspect that we might be about to get a lecture on the costs of division and segregation.

Dr Farry: I must first point out that I am more than happy to stay in the Alliance Party, for a number of reasons. I will certainly not be transferring to the Conservative Party.

My question is not about the cost of division; rather it is about the Member's comments that people should not make claims on resources that they cannot fund. Would he level that same criticism at the Executive with respect to their decision on the deferral of water charges? That decision may, in itself, have been a very sound one to make, but does the Member recognise that the deferral of water charges for a further two years has not been provided for in either the Programme for Government or the Budget? That announcement has been made without any identification of the resources that are needed to cover the cost of that deferral.

Mr Weir: The cost of that deferral is covered in the Budget. Yet again, the Alliance Party seems to have adopted an almost schizophrenic attitude: it says that the decision to defer water charges may well be the right one, but that it disagrees with it. Indeed, an alternative solution must be outlined. The Alliance Party must come clean on the issue of water charges and say whether it believes that water charges should have been imposed on people over the past two years. That was not my understanding of the Alliance Party's position.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way again. The simple answer to that question is that all those decisions must be taken in the round, and any decision on whether to defer water charges must be weighed up against all the other competing claims on resources. The decision to defer water charges may well be the right one. However, my point is that the Executive took a decision, in advance of all other considerations in the context of an economic downturn, to defer water charges without taking account of the alternatives as regards resources. They may have made the right decision by accident, but I do not think that the process that they used to weigh up all the alternatives was that thorough.

Mr Weir: Perhaps it is my ignorance, but having heard that intervention, I am now more confused about the Alliance Party's position than I was when the Member made his first intervention. The Alliance Party seems to want it both ways: its members want to be critical of the Executive but do not want to be seen to be too critical of the decision to defer water charges because they realise that it has an impact on their constituents.

The Budget delivers for front line services, makes the economy the top priority and offers record levels of support for the construction industry and capital investment. As Mr Wells states, there will always be a

degree of reprioritisation in Departments, but the Budget has been well thought out, meets the commitments in the Programme for Government, and has been resilient and flexible enough to meet the changing —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Unfortunately, Mr McCrea, you had the opportunity to contribute to the debate and did not take part. I was happy to give way to Dr Farry, who contributed to the debate earlier.

The Budget is worthwhile and can take Northern Ireland through these difficult times. I commend the Budget Bill to the House.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker — Mr Deputy Speaker, I should say. It has been a long couple of days.
[Laughter.]

I thank those Members who contributed to the Second Stage debate of the Budget Bill. It is the case, as one Member said earlier, that today's debate was, perhaps, more full of substance, in contrast to some of the nonsense that we heard yesterday, which may have something to do with those who contributed to the debate, and those who were absent. I do not make that point lightly, and there are some honourable exceptions — Mr Basil McCrea is present and he spoke yesterday — but Members will know to whom I am referring.

I thank those Members who took part in this legislative stage of the public-expenditure cycle. I place on record my thanks to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for assisting the accelerated passage of the Budget Bill and ensuring adherence to the legislative timetable.

I will try to address a number of points that were raised. Some of those points were raised in yesterday's debate, some are different and many are, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the subject that we are supposed to be debating. Although the Budget Bill deals with expenditure in this financial year and the early part of next year, Members took the opportunity to range far and wide — geographically and topically — in the issues that they raised, including not just the Budget but the Programme for Government itself. I have no difficulty with that, but it means that a large number of issues were raised, and I will not be able to address them all.

Many of those issues are the responsibility of other Departments and their Ministers — matters of relevance to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development were raised. As the Ministers for those Departments have responsibility for capital expenditure and the delivery of projects outlined in their departmental spending plans, those are matters

for those Ministers. However, I am happy to tackle as many of the issues as I can in the time available.

I am grateful for the approach of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton. He made a valid point that, although the spending proposals put forward by Departments in the strategic stocktake have merit, they are not all inescapable, and he highlighted a couple. That point was supported by Dr Farry, who made a well-thought-out and considered speech — and although I do not agree with all of the views that he expressed, at least he had thought about the issues, unlike some, and had evidence to support his ideas. He said that there is not a black hole in the Budget of £1.1 billion. That is a nonsense figure about which we have not heard much today, because the arguments to support it were well and truly demolished yesterday.

During the course of any budgetary process, demands will always outstrip resources, regardless of whether one is dealing with a charitable or voluntary organisation, an agency, a statutory body or a Government Department. If people are asked to put forward ideas and bids, they will put forward much more than is available on the table. That is a fact of life.

As a former Minister of the Department for Social Development and a former Minister of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I know that the advice often given is to put bids on the table, because if one does not ask for the money now, one may not get it further down the line. Therefore, areas are flagged up that may not be pushed to the limit.

I am also well aware of the challenges facing the Executive, and that all bids must be subject to robust challenge. Some Members have talked about a £1.1 billion hole in the Budget because of the bids that have been submitted. In that case, one could also say that there is a £400 million black hole in this year's Budget because the bids outweigh the resources in the December monitoring round. However, there is no such black hole in this year's Budget, so it is simply nonsense.

We must deal with the real issues, which are the big strategic issues that were flagged up in relation to the equal pay claim and the threats and challenges relating to the impact of the UK-wide efficiency savings on Northern Ireland that the Chancellor talked about in the pre-Budget report. Dr Farry, Simon Hamilton and Peter Weir talked about efficiency savings — and there is nothing wrong with making efficiencies. Indeed, everyone should try to make efficiencies, but there is a difference in that the so-called efficiencies in the pre-Budget report are designed to take money out of the system and not spend it elsewhere. Therefore, Whitehall is effectively talking about making cuts.

We have already pointed out the extent to which such cuts will affect Northern Ireland. It is a real issue

that we must grapple with from 2010-11. Its effect will not become clear until the Budget in April, but we know that recent announcements by the Opposition at Westminster — the Conservatives — indicate that they would be even more draconian in their plans, and they would start the process in the 2009-2010 financial year. Therefore, we must recognise where the real challenges lie and where the potential black holes will emerge from.

Mr McNarry and the other Members who talked about efficiencies need to be very careful because they are now allied to a party that would impose its plans on Northern Ireland if it had its way. They need to be very careful about what they are saying, and they need to recognise the seriousness of the situation.

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs and a number of Members raised issues concerning constituency projects. As part of the Budget process, funding has been made available for a wide range of capital projects in various constituencies by all Departments across Northern Ireland. As I said, it is the responsibility of Departments to implement those projects.

Requests have been made that spending should not be cut in certain areas, such as roads. A short time ago, Mr Attwood spoke about a new hospital for women and children in west Belfast. I am sorry that he has not stayed to hear my reply to his points, although he may come back shortly. We are all sympathetic to the idea, but a major sum of money will be required.

Mr Attwood spent most of his speech talking about the need for social housing, and other Members raised important areas of expenditure that they want to see either protected or expanded. All parties in the Executive must face the issues that we have agreed unanimously, the Budget and all the other matters.

As Dr Farry said, we must consider all the competing priorities and bids and decide on the issues that take priority. For example, if we decide to make a hospital project a priority, other projects in the capital spending plans in other Departments, such as roads or social housing, will have to be stripped back slightly to provide the money for that.

3.45 pm

One never hears Members or Ministers talk like that. No Minister — whether from the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party or any other party — ever says that he or she is prepared to give up money in his or her budget and look at ways in which we might do other things. All I am saying is that we need a dose of realism, and we must recognise that, if one pleads for money to safeguard expenditure or to spend extra in some areas, one must expect that — given a finite Budget — cuts will be made in other areas. Of course there must be such cuts.

Mr Wells and others made the point that Departments themselves can decide to look at their priorities. During the December monitoring round, when we were considering what could be done with the economic package, I emphasised that Departments should look at their budgets, and consider their spending plans for the rest of the year to see what could then be done to help the construction industry, employment and the economy in Northern Ireland.

I asked whether, at that stage, the Departments — rather than expecting money to come from elsewhere — might find money that could be used to help to ease pressures. However, when I received the returns, bids and proposals from Departments, there was little change to their existing plans. That was not the fault of the Department of Finance and Personnel: it is the responsibility of Ministers of all parties — SDLP, Ulster Unionist, DUP and Sinn Féin — to look at what they are doing in their Departments.

I am keen to ensure that we focus clearly on helping the economy. The Executive have put the economy first and foremost in the Programme for Government. Had we not done that, we would be justly criticised, hauled over the coals and told to revisit our priorities. However, we put the economy centre stage: it was the first time that Northern Ireland governmental priorities were ordered in that way. We attached a Budget, and we advanced an investment strategy that will deliver a substantial number of jobs and investment.

As we go forward, we must constantly monitor and review. In today's debate, in contrast to that of yesterday, Members took a much more realistic approach to in-year monitoring and to the Budget process and the way in which it works. Departments will surrender money. Mr Attwood spoke of the Department for Employment and Learning, its level of reduced requirements and the funds that it has given back to the centre — the DFP or the Executive — for reallocation.

Yesterday, Mr McNarry was highly critical of his party colleague Sir Reg Empey, the Minister who surrendered that money. Mr McNarry said that that amounted to inefficiency. That is a matter that he will have to take up with Sir Reg Empey. However, though I cannot comment on the Department for Employment and Learning's programmes and their fitness, it is far better for that Department to give up money in-year if it cannot spend it — it can be reallocated to areas where it can be spent — than to retain it as an underspend at the year's end, when it must be surrendered to the Treasury to go into end-year flexibility, and we would be unable to use it for years to come.

I urge all Departments to surrender funds in time. In each monitoring round — especially in this, the February monitoring round — I have put pressure on Departments to surrender money, rather than have it in their budgets

at the end of the year, because then it has to go back to the Treasury, and that is not at all satisfactory.

Roy Beggs talked about projects in the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development — and in each case he sought either protection of the budget or increased expenditure.

And yet, yesterday, some of his party colleagues argued for policies and moves from the Finance Department and the Executive which would have the inevitable effect of taking money away from those Departments, which are the four biggest spenders. How do you square that circle? Until there is a bit of financial realism, I have to question the financial literacy of some of the Members who contribute to these Budget debates.

The issue of social housing was raised by Mr Attwood, Mr McCann and other Members; I stand over entirely the comments that I made in a letter to the Minister for Social Development concerning social housing. Through an additional £20 million in funding for the social housing programme, which was provided in-year, and the flexibility provided to the Department for Social Development through the moving of a further £10 million into social housing, the Executive and I have demonstrated that we are prepared to put our money where our mouths are.

Currently, a lot of emphasis is being placed on social housing, an important issue in its own right and in providing assistance to the local construction sector. However, Members must bear in mind that, earlier in the year, when competing bids within the Executive were being discussed, much of the emphasis from the Department for Social Development was not on social housing or the housing budget. Rather, the priority of the Minister, and many of her colleagues, was to provide funds to deal with fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is an important issue, but that illustrates the point that in dealing with issues, there is only a finite amount of money available. If the Department wants money for fuel poverty, there will be less money for social housing. There is no extra money; it all has to come out of the same pot.

There are competing demands, many of which are very meritorious and well worth doing. However, if there is a finite Budget, Departments must prioritise and make decisions. It is very easy to produce a list of what must be done but never say what, as a result of that, will not get done. The Programme for Government and the Budget were agreed unanimously by all parties and all Members of the Executive; as far as the Budget is concerned there is a settlement. However, it remains open to Ministers, within the remit of their own responsibilities, to reorder priorities in order to meet

the current economic challenges or to decide that they want to reprioritise what they are doing.

In his wide-ranging speech, which, I think, stretched the boundaries of the debate, Mr O'Loan talked about climate change. I note his view on that; however, it is somewhat inconsistent with his calls for additional construction activity. He must recognise the competing demands that exist as far as the public purse is concerned.

Dr Farry quite rightly ridiculed and rubbished the "£1 billion hole" argument. He pointed out the absurd and ludicrous position of Mr McNarry — a position which, it has to be said, has not found support even among his own party Members. Yesterday, Mr McNarry said that he would not support the Supplementary Estimates, but in the end they were agreed unanimously. It is an irresponsible and somewhat childish approach to suggest taking a penny off the Budget. That he proposed and tabled such an amendment in these serious times makes one wonder what planet Mr McNarry is living on. He then suggested that it would be somehow sensible to stop the Budget and prevent money from going to Departments. Come 1 April, we would find the Department of Health, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Education and all the other Departments, stripped of funding, as a result of that suggestion. Imagine the economic crisis that that would plunge us into.

That is the serious proposition that was put forward by Mr McNarry, and Mr Farry was quite right to say that, although there may be issues, taking such a course of action would be entirely irresponsible. I have pointed up the fact that one of the biggest threats that we face is the Whitehall-imposed cuts that are being suggested in the pre-Budget report.

It is also important to point up the reference that one or two Members made yesterday to a report on public-sector pay. Mr McNarry from the Ulster Unionist Party Benches referred to a "worthy" report that talked about freezing public-sector pay at 1% increases, which is a real cut to public-sector pay at this difficult economic time. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the DUP will never implement such a plan in the current difficult times, and I am staggered that any Member should suggest that such a report is worthy, given the current economic situation. That report has no standing whatsoever with the Executive.

A number of Members mentioned the shortfall in capital spend. Our net capital expenditure plans are in the order of £1.3 billion, which Departments will not only meet but will exceed. The point that was made about delivery is correct; it is right to focus on delivery, and it is essential that investment strategy money is delivered for projects on the ground. That is happening in the Department for Regional Development, the

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development and the Department for Employment and Learning. It is happening with the delivery of new further and higher education colleges, roads, hospitals, health projects and housing. Delivery is taking place on the ground.

I have ensured that, as a result of some of the difficulties that were encountered in the procurement process through legal challenges to the frameworks, projects that would otherwise have been held up or slowed down will now go forward by conventional procurement methods. My Department has also moved to ensure the greatest transparency and openness in the construction industry's dialogue and liaison with Government by setting up a procurement task force and implementing a delivery tracking system to get people together so that they can be sure that the projects can be delivered as quickly as possible.

It is right that the projects be delivered; the focus should be on that rather than on getting an extra £10 million. The focus should be on ensuring that the tens of millions of pounds that are in the budgets are spent and delivered, and produce movement, results and output on the ground.

Someone said that 22 projects had been deferred in the past year. Thousands of projects across Northern Ireland are proceeding this year. Examples of those include: the upgrades of the Westlink, the M2 and the A4; the £300 million for the Belfast sewer project and 22 waste-water treatment plants; at least £200 million for schools; at least £200 million for hospitals; and, in agriculture, the farm nutrient management scheme. Capital expenditure this year will be some 26% or more higher than last year. It is essential that progress continues on that next year, and I am glad that the plans for next year include an increase in capital expenditure over this year.

4.00 pm

I hope that that will reassure people that not only do the Executive take very seriously the need to ensure that Northern Ireland is provided with an infrastructure that is fit for a modern society in the twenty-first century, but that we are determined to do what we can in the medium and short term to help our construction industry, and to create sustainable jobs in that industry. Things are particularly difficult in the construction sector.

Mr Attwood referred to several areas in which unemployment has greatly increased. Mr Weir and other Members pointed out — and we recognise — that, overall, Northern Ireland still has the lowest unemployment level of any region in the British Isles. However, there is no room for complacency. We must continue to do what we can.

On manufacturing, for instance, I was delighted with Thales's announcement of new jobs. It seems to

have been forgotten, but not that long ago, Bombardier announced what I believe was the biggest single investment in Northern Ireland. There are encouraging signs in manufacturing, but we are well aware that an issue remains in the construction industry. We will continue to take action to deal with that issue.

There are one or two areas that I hope that I can cover very quickly. Jennifer McCann mentioned poverty in the context of a downturn that I believe few, if any, economists forecast. Economists have been quoted liberally in the debate, and their views have been cited as proof. If a, b and c have said something, it must be right; they are all economists, after all. We may trawl through the contributions of economists, some of whom are fine people, but I doubt whether any of them forecast the sort of downturn that is happening in the UK, America or anywhere else, never mind Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, they are now cited as experts. I am always willing to take advice, but even in their advice — as we heard when Mr Weir quoted Richard Ramsey — different views are expressed and varying emphases are placed on statistics.

I believe, and hope, that Members are mature enough to accept that we are in a financial downturn; we know that it is having an impact on the economy right across the world. As an open, regional economy, Northern Ireland is not immune. We have limited access to policy levers. However, the situation at present, compared to what happened under direct rule, is considerably better.

Let me indicate why that is the case. Mr Cree talked about various announcements that have been made. Announcements must be followed by implementation. That is why I was surprised when he spoke about looking again at a small-business rate, because we will be bringing forward legislation on that very point. I doubt very much that Northern Ireland would get a small-business rates relief scheme, if it was still under direct rule.

Moreover, I doubt whether there would have been a freeze on business rates, at this crucial time, under direct rule. There certainly would not have been a freeze on regional rates under direct rule, because my predecessor, the then Finance Minister, Mr Robinson, froze domestic regional rates after year-on-year increases on regional rates of 10% and more. Water charges would have been implemented by now, not just in the non-domestic sector but for households.

Furthermore, we would not have had the fuel credit scheme, compensation for flooding or help for our fishermen and our farmers. We would not have had the level of investment that is contained in the investment strategy. We would not have had a policy that ensured that properly validated invoices were paid within 10 days, nor would we have had the pressure that is being put on the banks in Northern Ireland by the Office of the First

Minister and deputy First Minister. We would not have had the Government's £900 million package, which is designed to cover the non-cash costs of putting off water charges.

There would have been no rate and transport relief. There would not have been the package that I announced recently of £8 million for councils, which has helped to alleviate the worst effects of the accumulated impact of large valuation settlements for the MOD and BT, and other issues that would have put up rates bills. There would have been no reform of planning, with PPS 21, which has helped to move forward planning in rural areas.

There would certainly not have been free transport for elderly people — an initiative that was put forward by my party and approved by the Assembly. There would not have been free prescriptions. There would not have been the reliefs that have been introduced to help elderly citizens with rates, nor the lone pensioner allowance. Pensioners would have been unable to defer rates. All those benefits — whether they are for businesses, hard-working families or vulnerable people — have been introduced as a result of what the Executive have been able to do.

Of course, it would be great if we could go further. We all want to do so. However, we must operate within a finite Budget. Salaries must be paid and things have to be done. I urge Members not to lose sight of the work that is being done. We must focus on delivery and ensure that when people say that they want more to be done, they tell us not only what they want, but how they will finance it.

I am determined, along with my Executive colleagues, to do everything possible, at all times, to put pressure on the Treasury and the Prime Minister to do their part and to ensure that Northern Ireland has the resources that it requires. We must work together during the current difficult and challenging economic times, be realistic, and ensure that our priorities are delivered through the Budget and the Programme for Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that as this is a Budget Bill, it requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 5/08] be agreed.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill [NIA 11/07] do now pass.

I am glad to be able to return to the House after such a long break. I am not sure whether someone has it in for me at the Business Committee. I have had to deal with quite a lot of the House's business this week. However, it gives me pleasure to seek the Assembly's approval for the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill.

The Bill proposes to amend the existing primary legislation, the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, which allows the Department to regulate for safeguarding the health, safety, welfare and convenience of people in or around buildings, and for the conservation of fuel and power. The Order also sets out the powers, duties, rights and responsibilities of the Department, district councils and applicants on building regulations matters.

The Bill proposes to extend the principles of the building regulations in order to include the protection and enhancement of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. It also extends the matters for which building regulations may be made in order to encompass those new principles. Finally, it proposes several refinements to the responsibilities of the main parties to the regulations.

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

As Members have recently debated issues of sustainability and concern about the environment, it is timely that this Bill makes its passage through the House. I want to record my gratitude to the Finance and Personnel Committee for its thorough consideration of the matters that are raised in the Bill and other related issues — as is evidenced in its comprehensive report — and to other Members for their contributions at various Stages of the Bill's passage.

Following scrutiny of the Bill at earlier Stages, two amendments were agreed by the Assembly at Consideration Stage: first, to tighten up the requirement on district councils to take account of protected buildings in their consideration of applications for approval, and secondly, to remove the repeal of the civil-liability provision as a potential means to enhance compliance.

I am satisfied that the enactment of the amendments to the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order, which are proposed in this Bill, will make the regulatory framework for building regulations stronger, more

effective and more appropriate in meeting the rapidly changing needs of the construction industry.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): Members will be aware of the detailed report that the Committee for Finance and Personnel made on the outcome of the Committee Stage of the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill. I am sure that that report is a Stationery Office best-seller and has been widely read by both Members of the House and people across the country.

This is the first piece of primary legislation on building regulations in Northern Ireland in the past 18 years. The evidence received by the Committee reflected the diverse range of issues that fall under the policy remit of the Bill. At the outset, the Committee recognised that the Bill's importance lies not only in that it will update and streamline existing regulatory and enforcement provisions, but that, more especially, the Bill's provisions reflect the increasing significance of energy conservation, sustainability and environmental protection.

As part of its work, the Committee received evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, including professional bodies, environmental groups and building control practitioners from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions, including England and the Republic of Ireland. The evidence covered not only the specific clauses of the Bill and related policy and enforcement matters, but the topical issues of energy conservation and the use of renewable-energy technologies.

During its scrutiny, the Committee sought responses from the Department to each of the concerns and proposals raised by witnesses and to additional queries that the Committee raised. The Department also provided a series of written responses in addition to a further oral briefing, which clarified a number of the issues to the satisfaction of the Committee. In addition, the Department advised the Committee that some of the proposed amendments and concerns could be more appropriately taken forward through subordinate legislation or in associated guidance issued by the Department.

During our clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill on 28 May 2008, the Committee agreed to all the clauses without the need for amendment, except for clauses 2, 10 and 6 and the schedule of repeals. The amendments were in line with the Committee's recommendations and were discussed at the Bill's Consideration Stage on 13 January 2009.

I will now take the opportunity to highlight some of the commitments that the Department has given to the Committee in respect of taking forward policy issues that were raised at the Committee Stage and that fall within the wider remit of building regulations. Those commitments were set out in the Minister's formal response to the Committee's report.

The drive to reduce carbon emissions from new buildings, including the debate on the mandatory use of microgeneration systems, emerged as a major theme in our evidence. After its consideration of that evidence, the Committee pointed to the important interrelationship between the demand for low- or zero-carbon technologies, the capacity of the local renewables industry and the further commercialisation and development of the technology. The Committee concluded that market forces alone may not be able to sufficiently drive increased uptake of low- or zero-carbon systems and to support technological development.

The Committee also took the view that a firm and challenging timetable for the introduction of stricter regulations on carbon emissions from buildings will assist in that regard and that, conversely, faster technological development will facilitate even higher standards. Consequently, the Committee called on the Department to use building regulations to further promote and encourage the use of low- or zero-carbon technology by establishing 2016 as a firm target date for all newbuilds in Northern Ireland to be zero carbon, thereby keeping pace with developments in GB and the Republic of Ireland. I am sure that Members of the House will agree more heartily to a 2016 target date on this issue than to other target dates in the calendar.

The Committee welcomed the Minister's response to that recommendation in which he indicated his intention to commit to amending the building regulations in 2016 to require new dwellings to be zero carbon. The Minister may wish to elaborate on that in his remarks later.

On the specific debate on mandating, the Committee concluded that the nub of the issue is timing, as the use of low- or zero-carbon systems will increasingly become a necessity to help meet the carbon-emission requirements in newbuilds. The evidence clearly indicated to the Committee that energy-efficiency measures alone will not be sufficient in the medium to long term if Northern Ireland is to keep in step with the rest of the UK in reducing the levels of carbon emissions from buildings.

The Committee recognised and welcomed the fact that the provisions in clause 1 of the Bill will facilitate any future decision by the Department to introduce a requirement in building regulations for a percentage of energy used in new buildings to be derived from low- or zero-carbon systems. However, the Committee also called on DFP to regularly assess the cost-effectiveness of low- or zero-carbon systems and to keep under review the option of mandating microgeneration in the context of changing circumstances. The Committee welcomes the Department's positive commitments.

4.15 pm

Some witnesses proposed to extend the definition of protected buildings outlined in clause 2. The Department

explained that the term is linked to and harmonised with the definition that is used in planning legislation and outlined that attempts to list additional areas in primary legislation could restrict the scope of the powers. Therefore, the Committee was content with the Department's commitment to consider how buildings that are not covered by the definition of protected buildings in clause 2 might be addressed in guidance that is issued to district councils. The Committee looks forward to being apprised on the outcome of that exercise in the near future.

The provision for type approval in clause 6 received careful attention during the Committee Stage. The Committee had raised concerns that difficulties could arise if individual district councils did not accept the type approvals of other council areas. Although the Committee noted that district councils had already commenced a voluntary arrangement to ensure consistency of approach, it welcomed DFP's commitment to monitor the situation through regular building control liaison meetings.

The Committee noted the Department's advice that if voluntary arrangements fail to deliver, another Department should pursue any necessary legislative intervention. Committee members highlighted the need for the building control appeals process to be transparent and prompt, and called for formal protocols to be established to cover the publication of the basis for appeal decisions and the turnaround time for such decisions. The Committee welcomed the guidance that was published on the Department's website on the inclusion of a turnaround target for appeal decisions in the Department's corporate plan.

The Committee welcomed DFP's commitment to conduct a review of the present appeals mechanism and will monitor the Department's performance in that area. Furthermore, the Department committed to a proposal for additional regulations to reduce the time that is permitted to commence work following approval of plans. Current arrangements allow for individual houses within multi-house applications to be built to outdated standards. Given the problems in the property market, the Committee wants to reiterate that the Department should introduce the necessary subordinate legislation in order to close that loophole at the earliest opportunity.

The Committee had concerns about outdated legislation on dangerous buildings and places, and it welcomed the Department's commitment to facilitate discussions with building control on how to address that issue, including consideration of which Department is best placed to take the issue forward as soon as possible. The Committee had recommended that that review be prioritised, and we look forward to considering its findings.

The Committee has noted the close relationship and the scope for overlap between policy and legislation that covers building regulations and that which covers planning. That relationship was evident during the Committee's consideration of issues such as renewable energy, protected buildings and access for emergency services. The evidence suggested a need for greater integration of building regulations and planning functions at departmental level, where policy is developed, and at district council level, where responsibility for delivery and enforcement lies.

In the case of building control or — as is due to be transferred — in the case of planning, the Committee recommended consequently that consideration be given to transferring the building regulation function from DFP to the Department of the Environment and has noted DFP's advice that the wider Executive review of all departmental functions consider that issue after the implementation of the review of public administration (RPA).

The Committee looks forward to continued dialogue with the Minister and his Department on the various policy-related issues that remain to be addressed through subordinate legislation and guidance, on which the Department has given firm commitments.

I want to put on record the Committee's gratitude to all the individuals and organisations that provided written and oral evidence. Moreover, I thank the Minister, the former Minister and their officials, who have worked positively with the Committee in order to ensure the Bill's progression. I commend my fellow Committee members and the Committee staff for their careful work and consideration of the Bill's detail. On behalf of the Committee, I formally support the Bill during its Final Stage.

Dr Farry: I support the Final Stage of the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill.

The Bill's First Stage took place in February 2008, and its first anniversary is in one week. That is not a criticism of the process. It is a complex piece of legislation, and there have been several delays in the Executive. However, there is roundness in the fact that we have come full circle on the calendar. I am unsure whether Her Majesty is available in the next week to give the Bill Royal Assent within the year timescale. We will see what happens.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel set out the issues from the Committee's perspective extremely well, and I concur with most of what he has said. No doubt he is working almost as hard as the Minister today on DFP issues.

I will explore in more detail some of the issues that the Deputy Chairperson outlined, particularly in regard to where we go from here. I note the advice from officials, and those from whom the Committee received evidence,

that the energy-efficiency and renewable-technology agenda would be best advanced through regulation arising from the legislation, rather than through the legislation itself. The challenge is how the Department intends to take that agenda forward. I hope that the Minister may be able to give us some general indication of his intentions in that regard over the months ahead. The changed context and the economic downturn over the past year may have increased the need to move the agenda forward.

Will the Minister clarify where the bulk of the drive towards renewables will be taken forward under his jurisdiction? I note that he is embracing in the rating system the principle of rebates for those who are using renewable technology, and I welcome that. There is also a regulatory approach to advancing the agenda through building regulations. Perhaps the Minister will indicate to the House where he sees the balance between those two different approaches. No doubt both approaches are required, but what mix will the Department suggest on the way forward?

I want to reflect, as the Deputy Chairperson did, the strong recommendation of the Committee that low-carbon or zero-carbon technology should be encouraged in house building. Given the target of 2016 for the requirement of zero-carbon building, the Committee made the point that market forces alone would not be sufficient to move that agenda forward. There is, therefore, a very clear need for regulations. Perhaps the Minister will let us know where we stand on the code on sustainable homes with respect to that target of 2016 for low-carbon or zero-carbon technology.

Microgeneration has been a focus of the debate for some time; however, it is important to bear in mind that that may not necessarily mean the installation of one microgeneration facility for each house. A development could create the opportunity for certain economies of scale in the provision of technology. That needs to be covered by regulations, so that developers have the flexibility to find the most economically advantageous and energy-efficient method of addressing some of those concerns.

I want to reinforce the point that has been made about trying to find a synergy between planning and building control. I am not suggesting that powers should be taken away from DFP, but there is a logic to a single Department taking responsibility for planning and building control, because there is an overlap between those two aspects of development. Any efficiency that could be made by making those the responsibility of one Department would be very welcome for all, not least in regard to renewables.

Both the planning system and building regulations have roles to play in driving that agenda forward. The Merton rule in London, for example, with which a lot

of Members may be familiar, means that renewables are being encouraged through the planning agenda as opposed to through building regulations. There are opportunities in both regards, and it is important that we grasp the opportunity to tie all the issues together.

Clearly, we have done a good job so far in regard to the legislation, but there is a considerable amount of work to do in the future in ensuring that building regulations fit into the wider agenda of promoting the green economy. I look forward to the contribution of the Minister and his colleagues over the months to come.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful for the contributions from the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and Dr Farry, and for their general welcome of the legislation and the progress that has been made.

I will deal with one or two of the issues that were raised. Dr Farry mentioned the Merton rule, which applies in parts of England, and which takes its name from the early adoption by the London borough of Merton of the English planning policy statement 22, which was published in 2004. That policy statement permits local authorities to include policies in local planning documents that allow for a percentage of a development's energy to come from renewable sources. That policy relates to only larger developments of more than 10 dwellings or to buildings with a floor area greater than 1,000 sq m, where the use of such technologies in that particular development is economically and technically viable, and where the policy does not place an undue burden on the developer. Planning matters are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment's Planning Service.

The issue of zero-carbon buildings was mentioned. Members will know that there is an existing commitment to amend the subordinate regulations in 2010, which will aim to improve energy efficiency in new buildings by a further 25% against current standards for CO₂ emissions, with a further commitment to a 44% reduction in 2013. In 2007, the Westminster Government issued a policy statement entitled 'Building a Greener Future — Towards Zero Carbon Development', in which it announced that all new homes will be zero-carbon rated by 2016. I have asked officials to work with their counterparts in other jurisdictions in order to ensure that Northern Ireland building regulations maintain the same standards. That situation may change in the intervening period, but we will not be out of kilter.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed.

Resolved:

That the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill [NIA 11/07] do now pass.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 provides for upfront lump sum payments to persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma, or if the person has passed on, their dependants. The scheme breaks the link to workplace exposure to asbestos, and, in particular, provides financial support within a matter of weeks to people who previously were not eligible for help; for example, those who are unable to pursue a civil claim, or to claim a lump sum under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. That means that sufferers of mesothelioma are eligible for a payment whether they were employees, self-employed, or indeed never worked, provided that they have not received a compensation payment from another source.

Mesothelioma, which is a fatal disease caused by exposure to asbestos, is a particularly unpleasant condition for which there is no known cure, and a person's life expectancy from the time of diagnosis can be very short. Mesothelioma causes up to 50 deaths each year in Northern Ireland. These regulations prescribe the amounts of the lump sum payments and set out the detail of the conditions of entitlement under the scheme.

To avoid double provision, the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 specifies that persons who have received certain compensation payments — for example, a payment under the scheme in the 1979 Order — will not qualify for a payment under the new scheme. These regulations specify that a person who has received other similar payments — for example, payments made by a Government Department in consequence of mesothelioma — will not be entitled to a payment under the provisions of the new scheme.

4.30 pm

That is to ensure that people are not compensated twice for the same condition. In line with the scheme set up under The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, the amount paid, as a lump sum, to a person with mesothelioma is based on the age at which the person was diagnosed with the disease. Those diagnosed earlier in life will receive more. The amount to which a dependant may be entitled depends on the age of their relative at the time of death.

During the passage of the Mesothelioma, etc., Bill it was estimated that the average payment to sufferers under the scheme will be in the region of £6,000 to £10,000. The cost of the scheme is ultimately to be met by the introduction of a compensation-recovery process. All mesothelioma and 1979 scheme payments are to be recovered from subsequent successful civil compensation claims. Any moneys recovered will be ploughed back into the scheme with the aim of funding higher payments in the future. The scheme payment levels are set so that the overall expenditure is estimated to match the recoveries from civil compensation.

My Department has worked closely with Department for Work and Pensions to secure a pooling of funds so that people in Northern Ireland receive the same rate of payment as people in Great Britain, even though we are unable to recover sufficient money here to fund that higher rate.

I am pleased to be able to advise the House that since this scheme was introduced on 1 October 2008, a total of £154,826 has been paid, with the average payment being in excess of £25,800. That is yet another example of the benefits of the parity arrangements. The intention is that payments under the scheme will be increased over time up to the same level as those made under the 1979 scheme.

However, I make it clear that until payments under both schemes reach the same level, if a lump-sum payment has been made under the scheme and it is then discovered that a higher payment under the 1979 scheme is appropriate, an additional balancing payment will be made.

Overall, the regulations provide for the scheme to be as simple as possible, so that payments can be made within a matter of weeks. It is essential that the sufferer receive some level of compensation while they are still able to benefit from it. I hope that those payments will go some way to help sufferers in the final months of their lives.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The Committee for Social Development considered the Department's proposals to make the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 at its meeting on 26 June 2008, and considered the statutory rule at its meeting of 18 September 2008. The regulations make provision for lump-sum payments to sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma. The statutory rule provides clarity on eligibility and the amounts of payments. Although no amount of money could compensate for the misery and suffering caused by diseases such as diffuse mesothelioma, the amounts payable offer some assistance to sufferers and their dependants. Therefore, it is important that there is clarity on eligibility and the extent of payments.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development recommends that the Assembly supports the statutory rule.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. The mesothelioma lump-sum payment regulations are welcome because they include people who would not otherwise be entitled to compensation. The regulations include people who did not have direct contact with the problem itself, but who contracted the disease through contact with relatives or loved ones.

The regulations are also welcome as they will speed up the process; because, unfortunately, people do not live for very long after their initial diagnosis. The regulations are one of the benefits of parity, but I issue a caution: parity is not always beneficial. However, it is in this case. I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Mr Burns: I very much thank the Minister for proposing the motion. I fully support it.

Anything that can be done to help people who suffer from, and have been diagnosed with, mesothelioma is to be very much welcomed. It is a terrible disease, and the people who are diagnosed with it do not live for very long. I welcome anything that will help the families deal with their loss. The system is not too complicated — the families will be able to receive benefit and money, which I very much welcome.

Ms Lo: I also support the motion. Although no amount of money can compensate the relatives of those who die, the regulations are a means of helping them in practical terms.

It was very sad to hear the Minister say that there are still 50 deaths each year, even after we have discovered the problem of the chemical — I am sorry, I have forgotten the word for the disease. The good thing about the regulations is that the scheme is quick and simple to follow. Families will receive money within weeks. They will be able to deal with the funeral arrangements and other issues, which will relieve some of their difficulties and hardships. I very much support these very compassionate regulations.

The Minister for Social Development: I am pleased with the broad consensus of support across the Assembly for the regulations. I thank Mr Hilditch, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Ms Lo and the Committee for Social Development for the positive way in which they have dealt with the regulations. All of them were correct when they said that the payments will help to compensate people by recognising the undue suffering that was visited upon them as a result of mesothelioma — something that they could never have envisaged earlier in their working lives. The payments will help them to deal with the short period of life that is in front of them. It is very much a compassionate financial measure.

I trust that I have dealt with all of the matters that were raised by Members. However, I issue a cautionary word about parity. In all parity measures, it is important to realise that the money does not come from the Northern Ireland block grant; it comes directly from the Treasury under annually managed expenditure. If we were forced to take the money from the Northern Ireland block grant, that would impact on departmental budgets and on the delivery of services.

If people want to change that, they know that they must take their seats in Westminster and deal with the legislation on a line-by-line basis; either in the Committee rooms in the House of Commons or on the Floor of the House itself.

Once again, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your indulgence and for the support of all Members in the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

Christmas Bonus (Specified Sum) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the Christmas Bonus (Specified Sum) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

Many people are worried about the implications of the economic downturn and the credit crunch, and, having reflected on the debates that took place today and yesterday, I am sure that everyone in the House is only too well aware of the problems facing their constituents. In addition, we all recognise that people on low incomes face particular problems, and the purpose of the Order is to award a £60 increase to the 2008 Christmas bonus payment, which provided direct and swift financial support for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

In order to receive the 2008 Christmas bonus, a person must have been in receipt of a qualifying benefit in the week beginning 22 December 2008. Qualifying benefits include: state pension; pension credit; long-term incapacity benefit; qualifying employment and support allowance; carer's allowance; attendance allowance; disability living allowance; and certain bereavement benefits. Therefore, as well as all pensioners in receipt of state pension and pension credit, many disabled people, carers and those in receipt of bereavement benefits will benefit from the extra payment.

For pensioners, the £60 increase is equivalent to the largest possible amount that someone could have gained if the uprating of the basic state pension had been brought forward from April to January 2009.

The bonus is paid in two tranches: the traditional £10 bonus was paid as usual in December 2008, and the bulk of the additional £60 payments were made in January to 93% of pensioners and 50% of other eligible recipients. The remainder will be paid in February and March, in line with national arrangements.

Increasing the Christmas bonus to £70 provided an additional £26 million to assist some of the people who are most in need of help. In the end, more than 435,000 people will benefit from the increased payment. Not only does the payment provide much-needed cash during challenging times, but it is paid when people's outlay is greatest. Moreover, it is paid automatically, so no one need worry about how and where to make a claim. Importantly, the stand-alone payment is a tax-free lump sum, which does not affect entitlement to any income-related benefits that the beneficiary may already receive. In these tough economic times, this one-off payment will provide genuine help to some of the most vulnerable people throughout Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): On 27 November

2008, the Committee considered the Christmas Bonus (Specified Sum) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008, which provided a one-off increase, from £10 to £70, to the Christmas bonus payment. The Committee was happy to review the measure, because it provided a limited, although welcome, way to reduce the financial burdens on vulnerable people on certain benefits.

The increased Christmas bonus did not provide a lot of money, but, in conjunction with other anti-poverty payments, such as the Assembly's £150 fuel poverty payment, it is hoped that it will have made a difference to those most in need.

The Committee for Social Development recommends that the Statutory Rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

4.45 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is easier to say "Christmas bonus" than it is to say "mesothelioma".

The Christmas bonus has remained at £10 for over 20 years, so any increase is welcome. As Mr Hilditch said, it is particularly welcome when it is added to the fuel payment that has been approved by the Executive.

I remind the House that the Christmas bonus is a one-off payment for Christmas 2008 only. In his generosity, Gordon Brown decided to increase it to £60, but that is unlikely to happen again this year, unless he has an aberration. However, the Christmas bonus is to be welcomed. I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and welcome the Christmas bonus. Perhaps I misheard the Minister, however. Is there a sum of money outstanding to some people? Was it paid in December? If it is being called a Christmas bonus, it should have been paid at that time.

The Minister for Social Development: It always pays to listen, because one never knows what one will pick up. I am pleased with the Assembly's consensus in favour of the Order. I thank Mr Hilditch, Mr Brady, Ms Lo and the Committee for Social Development for the positive way in which they have dealt with the proposals at such short notice.

Several issues were raised, and I will place them in context. First, the Order will increase the Christmas bonus. I am not the first to say that it should have happened years ago, because the Christmas bonus was introduced when I was of a tender age way back in 1972, and it has never been increased in line with inflation or with the needs and requirements of society. The increase is due, and it is welcome.

Secondly, due to the extremely cold weather that certain parts of Northern Ireland have experienced over the past number of months, two tranches of the cold-weather payment have been released because the level of temperature at meteorological stations in Castlederg and Katesbridge some two weeks ago fell

below a certain limit. Everybody who lives in close proximity to those sites and within particular postcodes were entitled to further payments, so long as they qualified for certain benefits. That was an extra help.

The much-needed fuel poverty payment will provide further help, and DSD has been designated as the Department to implement that payment. I will bring forward the relevant regulations at the next meeting of the Executive. It is hoped that a lot more people, particularly those in receipt of pension credits and households in receipt of income support, will benefit as well.

Thirdly, Anna Lo raised a pertinent issue about the division of the payments. Everyone who is eligible will have received the traditional £10 bonus in December, as usual. That bonus is sent automatically to the eligible recipients by way of a computer payment. In the majority of cases, the additional amount of £60 was paid in January. Some 93% of one eligible group were paid, and 50% of another group. All outstanding payments will be paid by the end of this month or during March, which is in line with the UK national arrangements.

It is worth noting that a total of £4.354 million was paid to 291,500 pensioners and 143,900 others in December 2008.

In January 2009, an additional £60 was paid to 269,950 pensioners — which is 93% of those eligible — and 72,450 others — which is 50% of those eligible — at a total cost of £20.544 million. That is a considerable amount of money that is going into our local economy and going to help pensioners, the most vulnerable, and those who need it. Those are the people who are affected most deeply, and not only by the cold; they also have certain needs and requirements that need to be catered for. Therefore, those people must be accommodated in that respect. Any Member who is contacted by someone who, for some reason or other, has not received that payment within the next couple of weeks should feel free to contact me, and I will ensure that that matter is dealt with as quickly as possible.

I trust that I have dealt with all the issues that have been raised by Members. However, if I have inadvertently failed to deal with any points that Members raised, I will write to them. As I said earlier, the one-off payment will, in tough economic times, provide genuine help to some of the most vulnerable people and provide a valuable means of support for many who need it, particularly at this time of increased financial pressure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Christmas Bonus (Specified Sum) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

Amendment to Ministerial Code

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

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the following draft amendments, prepared by the Executive Committee in accordance with section 28A(3)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to paragraph 2.4 of the Ministerial Code:-

At end of sub-paragraph (v) delete “or”;

At end of sub-paragraph (vi) insert “; or”;

After sub-paragraph (vi) insert “(vii) relates to a proposal to make a determination, designation or scheme for the provision of financial assistance under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009”.

The motion completes the process that I set out to Members during the recent passage of the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. During the passage of that Act, one of the areas of intense debate was the extent to which the Executive would be able to consider and agree any determination and designation that we, as First and deputy First Ministers, considered necessary to enable financial assistance to be made, in the light of either exceptional circumstances or unsatisfactory funding arrangements.

As I made clear during the debates on that Act, the need for Executive agreement was, as a principle, never in dispute. Indeed, at the drafting stage, our preference — that is, the preference of the deputy First Minister and me — was, as for most of those who raised their concerns about the issue during the debates, to have the requirement for Executive agreement stated explicitly in the Act. However, our legal advice indicated that was not only unnecessary but inappropriate, as it would be a duplication of the existing requirement in the ministerial code.

Since the restoration of devolution in May 2007, the ministerial code, as the Assembly will be aware, is now a statutory document with statutory effect; therefore, its provisions have legal force. In particular, paragraph 2.4 of the code sets out the matters that Ministers are required to bring to the Executive for consideration. As is clear from other statutory references, “consideration” requires discussion and, also, agreement. It is our view that because of the inherently cross-cutting dimension to the Act, any proposal by us to make a determination and designation would be immediately caught by the existing requirements of that paragraph.

Nevertheless, and in view of the presentational benefits of clarity, we are establishing a separate reference on that point. As I advised the Assembly

during the debate on the Bill, we recommended to the Executive an amendment to the ministerial code that would place on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister an explicit requirement to bring to the Executive any proposal to make a determination and designation under the legislation.

After further consideration, we concluded that that requirement should also be placed on the Minister of the designated Department, so that he or she should bring the actual scheme for financial assistance to the Executive for consideration and agreement. The Financial Assistance Bill has now been given Royal Assent, and I believe that the debate on what is, or should have been, included on the Bill, must now be considered as settled in the interests of moving forward.

Today’s motion, therefore, seeks the Assembly’s agreement, as required by section 28A(3)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to the draft amendment as proposed, which is that paragraph 2.4 of the ministerial code be amended by the inclusion of a new sub-paragraph (vii) which adds any matter that:

“relates to a proposal to make a determination, designation or scheme for the provision of financial assistance under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009”

as one to be brought to, and considered by, the Executive Committee. The amendment reinforces our existing obligation to the Executive, rather than introducing an entirely new one.

We have already brought a proposal for a determination and designation to the Executive under the existing provisions of the ministerial code, and that was agreed at the Executive meeting on 12 February. We have now made that designation and determination in order to enable the Department for Social Development to prepare a draft scheme for financial assistance, and that will be brought to the next meeting of the Executive on 26 February.

It may be unusual for Ministers to be requesting the Assembly to place additional obligations on them, but I hope that the motion will be taken as a signal of our commitment to accountability and clear evidence that the Financial Assistance Act is not a mechanism to override the wishes of Ministers, but a means by which the Executive, collectively, can affect positive change. It will also establish, once and for all, the appropriate procedure to be followed, and ensure that the question of the need for Executive agreement is not open to subjective interpretation. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Spratt: I support the motion and the change that it brings to the ministerial code. Members will recall that the whole matter of the Executive’s responsibility was a bone of contention as the Financial Assistance Bill passed through the House. Many Members, particularly those to my right, questioned the guarantees given by

the First Minister at that time that this amendment would be brought to the Floor of the Assembly.

The change leaves in no doubt the commitment by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to bring such matters to the Executive. That has been done without the duplication of law, as sought by parties in the course of the debate surrounding the Financial Assistance Bill. Before the First Minister and deputy First Minister can make a determination, the Executive must agree that the relevant circumstances exist and that the financial assistance is warranted and necessary.

Furthermore, the Executive must agree to which Department the development of such a scheme is to be designated. In the previous debates, members in the smaller parties declared that to be some sort of a power grab. In light of that willingness to act with the consent of the Executive, such an argument does not now stack up. This will do nothing to marginalise the smaller parties and should, therefore, be welcomed by them.

When people in this country are in need, they demand that the Executive are able to act swiftly and decisively. I welcome the mechanisms that are now in place to enable that to happen. I hope that the House will support the motion.

5.00 pm

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Although I welcome the First Minister and deputy First Minister's initiative in proposing this amendment to the ministerial code, I must register my slight disappointment that they felt that they needed to do so, but I understand why they felt that way. As Members are aware, the origins of the amendment lie mainly in the debate on the Financial Assistance Bill, during which some parties claimed, quite incorrectly, that the Bill amounted to a power grab by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Those parties ignored the fact that the views of all Ministers would have to be considered when reaching decisions on any measures emerging from the Bill; therefore, there was no power grab. However, it is unfortunate that we have to pander to the insecurities of some Members.

Nevertheless, the amendment to the code has been proposed, and I hope that Members now accept that any notion of a power grab has been dispelled. The amendment will ensure that the Executive must agree on the determination of any schemes under the Act, thereby ensuring the rights of all Ministers. The First Minister and deputy First Minister will not be giving instructions to any Minister about what they should or should not be doing within their Departments. All Ministers will continue to have their say in the Executive, and that is the basis on which they will move forward. After all, it would be in no one's

interest to try to force a reluctant Minister to implement a policy or a measure with which he or she is unhappy.

Agreement and consensus are what power sharing is about. Once we have that, we can get on with the business of making a real impact on the lives of the people whom we represent, perhaps even implementing genuine cross-cutting strategies that achieve real change on the ground. By proposing this amendment to the ministerial code, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have shown their willingness to achieve the kind of agreement and consensus that is necessary to move forward. They are directly addressing the concerns that were articulated in the Chamber, no matter how ill-founded those concerns may have been. I commend them for doing so.

Mr B McCrea: I have listened with some interest to Members' comments. It was not the case that the so-called smaller parties were insecure. They were doing what they thought was right for their constituents. They were presenting the proposition that there is a balance of government to be found, which means that reaching a four-party consensus requires that everyone's views be taken into consideration. There was some concern that that was not the case.

It is useful that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have decided to clarify matters. Paragraph 2.4(vi) of the ministerial code covers any matter which:

"is significant or controversial and which has been determined by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly".

The problem is that other significant and controversial issues do not seem to have attracted the attention of the Executive or the two Ministers concerned. Although I do not wish to sideline this particular debate, I must point out, for reference, that there has been some discontinuity with regard to the education debate. In addressing all the challenges that we face, it surely behoves all of us to try to find a way to work together — indeed, both today and yesterday, the House considered many of the serious economic challenges that we face. That does not mean lecturing people and saying, do as we do and you will be OK. It means listening with respect, and offering amendments with respect — it works both ways — so that we can establish how best to find a way forward in these trying circumstances.

We are happy to support the motion. We are grateful to Mr Spratt for highlighting the guarantees involved. That is all that is required by those in the Chamber who want to join together in working for all the people of Northern Ireland. We must not reach the stage whereby individual Ministers operate in baronial castles, to their own agendas, while ignoring the plight of colleagues and the challenges that they face. Surely that can lead only to division. That is not the sort of progress that we want to make.

Although I understand that the ministerial code is written in its present form so as not to alienate any section of the community, it is important that we find a way to act collectively. Many people in this part of the world would have been unaware of what we were talking about in today's debate on the Budget Bill. However, those people will look to each and every one of us for leadership. Leadership comes through trust. I agree that no party has a monopoly on petty party-political sniping — *[Interruption.]*

I am happy to take a descant from Ms Anderson on that issue.

I have tried repeatedly to tell Members that things are different; the challenges that we face this year are different from those that we faced last year. There will be disagreements, and that is right and proper, but we have to find a way to work together to move forward. Instead of being ambiguous or fudging the issues, we should front up to them and do things properly. In that spirit, I am happy to support the motion on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion. The First Minister has delivered on his commitment to amend the ministerial code; the wording of the amendment is straightforward, clear and contained in its own strict frame of reference. We can safely ignore the begrudgery of Martina Anderson, who illustrated how people in larger parties can be small-minded.

The SDLP's concerns about the accountability to the Assembly of the measures in the Financial Assistance Act were much wider than those addressed by the amendment to the ministerial code. I note what the First Minister said today about the purpose of the Financial Assistance Act's operation. I hope that the Act is not abused and that the rights of Members are not abused by the exercise of its provisions. Only the future can determine whether that will be the case.

Given that it is now written in the ministerial code, we wonder why there was such strong resistance at the time to inserting the role of the Executive on the face of the Bill. That would have been more straightforward.

We are entitled to remind Members of the difficulties that surround the enforceability of the ministerial code, which is a serious outstanding issue. I hope that that never becomes an issue with regard to the Financial Assistance Act, and that the terms of the requirement to bring matters to the attention of the Executive are so clear that they would never be challenged. However, that also remains to be seen.

Mr Ford: In the face of such overwhelming unanimity in the Chamber, albeit with qualifications from Members on either side of me, I will not detain the House excessively to discuss the motion. The First Minister said correctly that the debate on the Financial

Assistance Act is over — the issue is simply the modification of the ministerial code.

The First Minister will not be surprised to hear anyone from these Benches welcoming his remarks about the need for the Executive to move towards greater collectivity and ensuring that they act as one in the implementation of necessary, difficult decisions, particularly in light of the current economic downturn. Those of us who have been accused of banging on forever about collectivity and partnership will doubtless continue to do so, while recognising that we have won a small victory in the change to the ministerial code.

If I continued too far in that direction, there might be a danger of repaying too many of the compliments that we were paid during the discussion of the Bill. Therefore, although we welcome the implementation of a change in the ministerial code, the test will be to see the wholeheartedness with which Ministers engage in genuine partnership and genuine power sharing, as opposed to what has happened up to now, which has been too much power division into individual ministerial silos. This is a modest gesture in the right direction, and we hope that we will see more of that.

Apparently, Martina Anderson has an insight into the workings of the Executive and, in particular, OFMDFM, but I do not. I can only go on their actions, rather than on the expressions of goodwill that are emerging this afternoon. However, at least those expressions of goodwill are better than the expressions of ill will that we have seen in the past. On that basis, I accept entirely the point made by the First Minister in his opening remarks that Ministers do not often ask to have responsibilities placed on them when they come to a Chamber such as this. It is perhaps the nature of our peculiar system of government that it was necessary for them to do so. In that spirit, I welcome the motion and trust that it is a sign of a greater forward movement together.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I sat through many hours of Committee sessions, discussing the Financial Assistance Bill, as did other Members. We also spent many hours in the Chamber, debating the Bill. We are all aware of the necessity of the Bill to help the people of the Province, and that matter has been debated in the Chamber on many occasions. That is our responsibility as elected representatives, and it is one that I take very seriously.

The amendment to the ministerial code is simply part of the necessary amendments to enable the operation of the Financial Assistance Bill, which has now received Royal Assent. That is the focus. There are no hidden agendas, no sly moves and nothing at work behind the scenes. As such, there is no need to debate the issue and no need for the renewal of the

comments that were made by some Members in an attempt to halt the Bill. Now is the time to move together.

The motion is simply worded for a simple purpose — to facilitate the Bill. The Bill has been passed, and I ask that Members support the deeds that flow from it and the delivery of the help that has been promised. I am glad that there seems to be agreement among Members to support the motion. To argue otherwise would prevent help being given to people who need it at a time of financial uncertainty. We need to ensure that nothing stops people from receiving the help that they need.

I support the motion as a step on the path to bringing about the provisions of the Financial Assistance Bill, and I ask that Members do the same, but not with the same begrudgery with which some Members have said that they will go along with it. Let us support it in an honest and truthful manner.

Mr Elliott: Like Mr Ford, I will not delay proceedings, but I would like to make a few comments. Before the Financial Assistance Bill was brought forward by accelerated passage, we all heard the calls from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they needed accelerated passage to move the process forward, particularly in light of the payments of £150 that were to be given to people who are less well off and who are suffering winter hardship. We were told that all amendments would be looked at in a positive light, but we have all come to know how difficult that was, because none of the amendments that came forward from any of the two main parties was accepted.

All the amendments were put forward in good faith, and with the wish to try to assist the legislation and to improve it. It is unfortunate that that was thrown back in our faces and was basically rubbished to a large degree by Members from the two main parties.

My colleague Basil McCrea has already mentioned some instances where the ministerial code, as it stands, has proved to be unable to curtail some Ministers in the form and spirit in which it was meant to. It is unfortunate when a Minister refers to the IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands as a local hero. That concerns me greatly, and I would have hoped that an amendment to the ministerial code could have changed that.

The proof of the pudding will be in the delivery of the changes that will be made to the ministerial code. I, for one, and my party will wait with anticipation in the hope that it will actually improve the code.

Again, that remains to be seen. We opposed that element of the Financial Assistance Bill, which we believed to be a power grab. The Members to my left were not too happy that we described it as such, but that is exactly what it is. However, it has passed into law. We need to work with it, make it better and obtain

the benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. That will be the positive outcome of the process.

5.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the amendments to the ministerial code. The First Minister said that it would strengthen the accountability of Ministers to the Assembly. It is disappointing that in proposing the amendments, the First Minister and deputy First Minister did not take the opportunity to strengthen the ministerial code in light of recent comments made by Minister Wilson about foreign workers. Those comments flew in the face of EU and Northern Ireland legislation. It is a pity that the opportunity was not taken to stress that Ministers are responsible for what they say. They cannot change hats and speak as a councillor one day, a Minister the next and a public representative on another. Ministers are Ministers.

Ms Anderson said that the SDLP upset the DUP and Sinn Féin by alleging a power grab. However, that is unsurprising, given that we have little confidence in how the Executive are managed. Mr Deputy Speaker, in an interview, you said that DUP and Sinn Féin Ministers were in the majority on the Executive and, therefore, everything would be railroaded through. That is very disconcerting. The agenda for Executive meetings may be published as little as half an hour before meetings are held, which is hardly what one can call genuine partnership or inclusive government.

With respect to the genuine cross-cutting strategy, the First Minister and deputy First Minister should get down to the work that is already within scope of their Department on bringing forward the long-awaited strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration, which was to be placed before the House last November. With that, alongside the single equality legislation, the gender equality action plan and the anti-poverty strategy, there is ample work for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to get on with.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members not to refer to the Speaker or Deputy Speaker, and when they do, to refer to them correctly and not to misquote them.

Mr Attwood: To borrow a phrase:

“I fear the Greeks even when they bring gifts.”

Or, more accurately, as my colleague has advised me:

“timeo Danaos et dona ferentis.”

As the First Minister rightly said —

A Member: We are not Greeks.

Mr Attwood: I said “Greeks”, not “geeks”. *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister said that the matter is now settled. However, whereas it is true that the legislation is settled, and the ministerial code will be settled after the vote, the concern that lies at the heart of the debate is not settled. An insight into that is provided by the

comments from the DUP Benches, in which there has been some offering of an olive branch. It may not have had many leaves, but nonetheless, there was a sense of an olive branch.

Mr B McCrea: It is a stick.

Mr Attwood: I was tempted to conclude that, but I want to be generous.

However, that did not characterise the comments that came from the Sinn Féin Benches. The Member for Foyle Martina Anderson said that the amendment was pandering to the insecurities of the smaller parties.

That came from a Member who singularly refuses to take interventions on the Floor of the House; if there is a more dramatic example of insecurity, I cannot name it.

I was not at all surprised to hear the First Minister say that it is unusual for an Executive to have legislative responsibilities placed upon them. That has been the Member for East Belfast's pattern of behaviour throughout the period of attempting to rewrite the Good Friday Agreement. It is the SDLP's view that accountability mechanisms have been put in place not for the sake of accountability, but for the sake of control, and as impediments to the good function of the Government. Members will expect me to make that point, whether they agree with it or not.

Ultimately, this piece of legislation has to be judged against the assertion made in the Assembly by the Sinn Féin Whip that Members will have to get used to their views being dismissed when it comes to the interests of the smaller parties; to good amendments to bad law; to proposals to alleviate issues of concern to our community; to the level of input from all the people whom Mr Spratt referred to as being on the right of him; and to the input of all those legislators and Members.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member to misquote another Member in the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have drawn attention to the issue of misquoting, and hopefully, Members will take note of that.

The First Minister: I welcome the contributions made by some Members, but sadly, those of others were characterised by the same type of foolishness that we saw during the several Stages of the Financial Assistance Bill.

I was told not to lecture people; however, given that some Members still do not seem to understand what a ministerial code is, I think that it would be of some value. Both the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott — who does not seem to understand this or a number of other things — and Dolores Kelly think that the purpose of a ministerial code is, or perhaps could be, to silence the remarks of an individual.

Ministers can make whatever remarks they want, and it will have no impact on the ministerial code.

The ministerial code is concerned with the actions and decisions of Ministers. If decisions are required that are significant, controversial or cross-cutting, they are required to come to the Executive. If a Minister does not bring to the Executive a matter that is significant, controversial or cross-cutting, the decision that that Minister makes is not valid. It does not matter which Department that Minister is in, whether it is OFMDFM or any other Department, in those cases, if the decision is not taken by the Executive as a whole, it is not a valid decision and, as such, can be cut down.

Mr Durkan: Does the decision on the Maze stadium come under “significant, controversial or cross-cutting”?

The First Minister: The Member does not seem to realise that in the case of the Maze, it was a non-decision — a decision not to do anything. Every day Ministers decide not to do something; is the Member really suggesting that every time Ministers decide not to do something, they should come to the Executive to explain that they decided not to do something that might have been significant, controversial or cross-cutting? It is decisions to do something that come to the Executive.

The Member can take his own legal opinion on that matter.

The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott seems to have picked up nothing from the previous debate. Does he realise how foolish he looks when he comes to a debate in which the specific purpose of the motion is to place the power in the hands of the Executive as a whole yet he stands up and suggests that the motion is a power grab by the First Minister and deputy First Minister? He has no embarrassment about the fact that he has made that kind of remark and about the contradictions that it entails.

He started his speech by referring to the Financial Assistance Bill's accelerated passage and the need for a willingness to take amendments on board. We accepted four amendments, based on what was said during the consultation process by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, on which his party is still present, and by the comments that were made by Ministers, including two from the Ulster Unionist Party. We did take on board four amendments, but in Mr Elliott's mathematics, that ends up as none at all.

The Member for South Belfast Mr Spratt raised the issue of the scare tactics that were used in the early part of the Financial Assistance Bill's passage. It seems that there are still some Members who are not red-faced by the fact that they keep digging themselves into a hole, even though the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

We have already started the first use of the Financial Assistance Act. We brought the determination and designation to the Executive, and we met the Minister for Social Development and indicated that DSD was being designated as the Department to introduce the scheme. We have already written to that Department to indicate that it is the designated Department, and the Executive have decided that DSD should introduce a scheme at the next meeting. The process has been accelerated as far as OFMDFM can do so, and it is now in the hands of DSD to bring the appropriate scheme to the Executive. On receipt of Executive approval, DSD will administer the scheme.

I hope that the issue of scare tactics will be over for now, and as the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon quite rightly said, the public could not care less about wee games. The public do not care in the least; they want action at the end of it. People are waiting for much-needed payment, and I hope that there will be no delay in the matter. OFMDFM has taken the steps to accelerate the process, and I hope that that will continue.

Basil McCrea was less than convincing when he said that he was not insecure. He made it clear that as far as he was concerned, it was important that issues such as the remarks made by the Minister of Education should be caught by the ministerial code. I say again: decisions are taken on the basis of the ministerial code when a Minister does something — when he or she makes a decision and acts on that decision. If the Member has a problem with remarks made by any Minister that he thinks are a breach of the Pledge of Office, there is a procedure that he can follow. He can get 30 signatures, he can put down a petition of concern, and he can use the stipulation that is contained in legislation that requires the removal of that Minister.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the lecture from the First Minister. There is profound disappointment that this place has not found a solution to the education issue. The First Minister rightly said that people are looking to us for delivery. Is there no way that he and his Executive colleagues can find a resolution to that travesty? If that cannot be covered by the ministerial code, perhaps we need another way to consider such matters.

The First Minister: I will go off on a slight tangent in order to answer the point. If there had been a resolution of that problem, we would have been happy to have introduced it. The Member's party and his Ministers did not find a resolution to it, and he is right to say that people are discontented that the Assembly as a whole was unable to find a resolution. It is, therefore, a good thing that at St Andrews, we ensured that the right to academic selection was secured. It is unfortunate that his party was not part of that process.

5.30 pm

The Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan said that he hopes that the code will not be abused. I do not know of any other piece of legislation that has more accountability built into it. Clause 1 requires the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring matters to the Executive for determination and designation. It requires the Minister whose Department is designated to bring the scheme to the Executive.

At each stage, the Committee may — under clause 1 and clause 2 — request consideration of that matter. I would expect the Minister for Social Development to want to consult with her Department as she brings forward a scheme. Any other Minister who is so designated in relation to any further use of the legislation will want to involve their Committee.

In addition, clause 1 enables the Assembly, if it does not like the scheme that is developed, to have the matter debated and annulled in the House by negative resolution. Clause 2 allows the use of affirmative resolution to vote against a proposition. There is no more accountable and democratic decision-making process than that contained in this legislation.

I am sorry that time does not permit me to go into any more detail. I welcome the remarks made by the leader of the Alliance Party about greater collectivity. He and I both hope that that will be a trend and a pattern that develops over the months and years ahead. The ministerial code is the foundation on which the Executive operate, and by which the accountability of individual Ministers to the whole is secured. As First Minister and deputy First Minister, we recognise that we are no less bound by those requirements than any other Minister.

The motion seeks to clarify and to strengthen our obligations under the code in respect of the operation of the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. In doing so, we intend, and hope, to put beyond the doubt of any reasonable individual our intention to use the Act as a vehicle for the Executive to respond to the needs of the community collectively, swiftly and effectively.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Question is put, I remind Members that the vote on the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the following draft amendments, prepared by the Executive Committee in accordance with section 28A(3)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to paragraph 2.4 of the Ministerial Code:-

At end of sub-paragraph (v) delete “or”;

At end of sub-paragraph (vi) insert “; or”;

After sub-paragraph (vi) insert “(vii) relates to a proposal to make a determination, designation or scheme for the provision of financial assistance under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009”.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Inquiry into the Role and Potential of Credit Unions in Northern Ireland

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving and winding up on a motion on a Committee report, up to 15 minutes will be allowed to propose and 15 minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (05/08/09) on its inquiry into the role and potential of credit unions in Northern Ireland.

Before commenting on the substantive matter, I wish to express my gratitude to the people who assisted the Committee during the inquiry — the Committee Clerk, the former Committee Clerk and the Committee secretariat — for their work in supporting the inquiry.

I also thank the Assembly Research and Library Services for the high-quality research and analysis that were provided to the Committee; Hansard for its accurate reporting of evidence sessions involving all the witnesses who appeared before the Committee during the inquiry; and the Printed Paper Office for its prompt and professional handling of draft reports.

The Committee is grateful to all those who provided evidence, including departmental officials who supported the Committee in the course of its inquiry. Some witnesses gave evidence more than once — not least, the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions and the Irish League of Credit Unions.

I thank my Committee colleagues for their constructive and positive approach to identifying what the Committee believes to be the optimum means of providing Northern Ireland with a credit union movement that is allowed to meet the needs of credit union members and the objectives of sponsor organisations and regulatory authorities.

I want to acknowledge the encouraging regard that the Minister afforded the Committee's inquiry throughout its duration, as well as the engagement of her officials.

As Members will be aware, Northern Ireland's credit union movement dates back to the 1960s. The movement grew and developed throughout the region and now boasts more than 180 individual credit unions, with membership — according to Department of

Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) figures — that represents more than 50% of the population, compared with membership in GB, which represents less than 2% of the population.

Northern Ireland credit unions hold net assets that total more than £800 million, compared with £500 million for credit unions in the whole of GB. Credit unions here are deeply rooted in the communities that they serve and are relied upon by many people in those communities to meet their day-to-day needs for financial services.

Despite their deep-rooted history, and their being so heavily relied upon, credit unions in Northern Ireland have not been able to provide the wide range of services that their counterparts in GB or in the South can offer. Credit unions here can offer, essentially, just three services, compared with 12 in GB and more than 20 in the South. Those services are listed in an annex to the report. That disparity was the key issue that the Committee sought to investigate during the course of its inquiry. One of the report's key recommendations is the expansion of credit union services.

Credit unions across the water can offer services such as current accounts, electronic transfer of wages, ATMs, debit cards, mortgages, direct debits, and so on. Committee members agreed that a solution must be found that will enable credit unions in Northern Ireland to provide similar services to their members.

Credit unions in Great Britain can also participate in Government savings initiatives. That is a particular area in which the credit union movement can, if given the opportunity, make a significant and lasting impact to tackle financial exclusion.

In Northern Ireland, uptake of child trust fund vouchers by parents and guardians is much less than in GB. In some parts of Northern Ireland, uptake is approximately 50%. The Consumer Council estimates that £11 million of child trust funds are unclaimed by parents and guardians in Northern Ireland — a region that relies much more heavily on the credit union movement than any other GB region, but where, unlike any other GB region, credit unions are prevented from providing that essential service. Given the strength of Northern Ireland's credit union movement, it is not difficult to see how widening the range of services that it is able to offer could provide substantial benefits in that area alone.

The Treasury report entitled, 'Financial inclusion: the way forward', which was published in 2007, suggests that access to affordable credit, savings and insurance products are key factors in determining an individual's ability to cope with financial pressure. It states that people who are without access to such products are more likely to be:

“forced into using high-cost sources of lending instead, including home credit (“doorstep lending”) or, worse, illegal loan sharks who use fear and intimidation to extort huge sums from their victims.”

For many people in Northern Ireland, there is currently no alternative to some sort of doorstep lending, because credit unions are not allowed to provide the range of services that they need. Credit unions can provide a realistic, trusted and empathetic alternative to those forms of lending; however, they can do so only if they are allowed to provide the services that their members need and cannot otherwise obtain at reasonable rates.

During the course of its inquiry, the Committee explored options to enable credit unions to provide those additional services. Option one was to consider the delegation of regulation by the Financial Services Authority (FSA) to DETI. Option two was to consider splitting or sharing regulation between the FSA and DETI.

Although the Committee was relatively comfortable with either option, particularly option one, they proved unfeasible because, for various reasons, the FSA and the Treasury did not support either option. It was also difficult to detect any enthusiasm for them from the Department. Had the Committee made recommendations along the lines of either option, the consequence could well have been many more years of discussion and negotiation with no guarantee — and, indeed, little likelihood — of an outcome that met the needs of credit union members.

The Committee explored the third option of forming a company, regulated by the Financial Services Authority, to offer the additional services through credit unions but with credit union regulation remaining within DETI. There was little support in the credit union movement for that option, not least because it involved introducing an additional layer of bureaucracy that is not necessary for credit unions elsewhere.

The Committee’s recommendation, therefore, is option four which is for DETI’s Companies Registry to retain responsibility for the registration of credit unions as a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, while inviting the Financial Services Authority to regulate all Northern Ireland credit unions under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. That recommendation has the advantage of credit unions being able to retain the close, amicable working relationship that they have built with the Department’s Companies Registry. It also retains credit unions as a devolved interest for the future and protects possible policy opportunities for the Assembly and the Executive.

The continuing relationship with DETI’s Companies Registry should prove invaluable in providing continuity and in assisting credit unions to manage the transition to FSA regulation. That will also assist the FSA in getting to know the credit union movement here and help it to

develop close, productive working relationships with our credit unions.

The Committee arrived at that recommendation after much consideration and having taken into account the needs of credit unions that do not wish to expand their range of services. The Committee received assurances from the FSA and the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd (ABCUL) that FSA regulation in Great Britain is not unduly burdensome.

Indeed, the ABCUL representative who gave evidence to the Committee informed us that FSA regulation:

“is one of the best things that has happened to credit unions in Britain”.

He also said that it has established:

“good controls and desired results for the credit union sector without being too onerous”.

ABCUL stated that the “lighter touch” — or version 1, as it is called — regulation for smaller credit unions there is mainly desk-based with occasional visits and a focus on establishing compliance standards, and that relationships between the FSA and credit unions are positive and constructive.

In order for the recommended option to be implemented, amendments to the Credit Unions (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 would be required. The initial indications are that that can be achieved. The Committee’s report will be a key document in informing the Treasury review of the regulatory framework for credit unions and industrial and provident societies here, which was announced in the pre-Budget report.

The Committee recognises that to make the changes that are required is not merely a matter of handing over regulation and walking away. On the contrary, the Committee has recommended a full package of measures that need to be introduced to assist and enable credit unions here to make the change. Those measures include an FSA presence in Northern Ireland, at least for an agreed transitional period; a programme of training for credit union management and staff in the operation of the new structures and procedures; a package of financial support to assist credit unions to obtain the training, resources and equipment associated with the changeover; and an extension of the Government’s growth fund for credit unions in Great Britain, and any future such funding, to include Northern Ireland credit unions.

The Committee also recommends that credit union membership is opened up to allow people to open joint accounts and to allow groups and societies to open accounts where their aims are compatible with the ethos and values of credit unions.

5.45 pm

The Committee recommends that credit unions are allowed to work with the FSA to consider how to

reinvest a proportion of their assets in the communities they serve. Credit unions recognise that they need to work with Government Departments in that regard.

Mr McCarthy: Given the FSA's abysmal recent record in Great Britain and elsewhere, and given the current financial disaster, does the Member, or the Committee, recognise the preference of the Irish League of Credit Unions, in the report, for the entire operation to remain within DETI Companies Registry?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member is right; the Irish League of Credit Unions preferred the FSA to delegate its powers to DETI. However, the FSA made it clear that it does not want to delegate its powers to anybody, and that is the view of the Treasury also. Moreover, the Committee did not detect much enthusiasm in DETI for authority to be delegated. Therefore, if the Member's criticism is that, fundamentally, the FSA should not be in charge of regulating credit unions, he must recognise that, in any event, the authority would remain as FSA authority: it would have been in charge of regulation, and it would have set the standards.

Regardless of any other issues involving the FSA's performance in relation to banking and financial services, no concerns have been raised about its regulation of credit unions. The report that we were getting from credit unions in Britain was positive and encouraging in that respect. However, the Treasury — and we as a devolved region — will be able to recommend longer-term changes to the financial regulation of banking, and so on. Therefore, in the future, there could be an overall financial services authority with bespoke regulatory arms that deal with banking, insurance and, perhaps, credit unions and financial services. If that happens, there will be an opportunity to include a more regional aspect to the FSA.

The Committee is aware that questions about the FSA remain unanswered. However, if resolving all the issues that pertain to the FSA were a precondition for making progress on the needs of credit unions here, that would be adding to the delay that has already existed for many years. Late in 2004, I approached a direct rule Minister about the issue highlighted by the Irish League of Credit Unions. Indeed, it is an ongoing problem that was identified long before 2004. The Member's point is well taken, but the Committee has considered all the options.

The adoption of the report's recommendations will represent a considerable challenge and an enormous opportunity for credit unions, and will benefit individuals, families and communities. Therefore, I commend the report to the House and seek support for the motion.

Mr Newton: I join the Chairperson in thanking the Committee staff and everyone who gave evidence.

We are discussing this report in the context of a major downturn in the economy during which unemployment is rising and closures of household-name companies are commonplace. The situation that has arisen with the Presbyterian Mutual Society, which is an unregulated organisation, will cause many investors to face extreme difficulties. Indeed, they might wish that the society had considered regulation as its approach became more ambitious. On a more positive note, the credit union movement wants to play an increasingly positive role through increased services to its members.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I support the report and declare an interest as a member of a credit union. The report highlights credit unions' importance to the local community and outlines their roles. The local credit union is the first port of call for many people who want to apply for a loan for a comfort item or — as is more likely — out of necessity. However, in Northern Ireland, credit union members are unable to receive the full benefits of membership enjoyed by those in GB or the Republic of Ireland. The Committee's report attempts to address such issues while providing the safeguards that investors expect and need.

One of John Hume's claims to fame is that he started the first credit union in Northern Ireland. Since then, we have witnessed amazing growth, with the development of approximately 170 credit unions in the Province.

That is coupled with the fact that the credit unions are supported by both sides of the community, with the Orange Order playing a major role, and the Roman Catholic Church playing a much more substantial role in promoting the benefits of credit unions throughout their communities. There is no exclusivity, however, as individuals cross what might be perceived as boundaries to join locally based credit unions. That is to be welcomed.

The importance of the credit union movement can be seen from the fact that some 26% of the population in Northern Ireland are members, compared to less than 1% of the population in England and Wales. That confirms the important role that credit unions play in our society. It also verifies the local community's confidence in the credit union movement.

The report highlights a number of recommendations aimed at improving the services that credit unions may provide. It is clearly evident from those recommendations that the most significant change we could make to the role played by credit unions would be to create the circumstances that would allow them to expand the range and quality of services they may provide. Currently, credit unions can only provide a small number of services, including share accounts, loans and life assurance. Compare that to the number of services available in Great Britain and the Republic,

and it is apparent that the people of Northern Ireland are unable to utilise the full benefits of membership.

I also welcome the recommendation that the FSA and DETI should work together to provide credit union staff with knowledge and skills to operate the new regulatory arrangements necessary for additional services.

The final recommendation that I wish to mention is that there should be appropriate reinvestment of assets by credit unions into community development and community enterprises. That would have the potential to bring about significant economic benefits to communities. I have reiterated the positive role that credit unions play in the community, and the reinvestment of a proportion of assets would be welcome.

In conclusion I will make two important points. The report acknowledges that many credit unions are content with current regulatory arrangements and have no desire to expand the range of services that they offer. If that is the level of their ambition then they can take advantage of the lighter touch to which the Chairperson referred, which will meet the needs of those unions. For those that think on a larger scale, changing from the current regulatory regime to the FSA regime will require management and staff to train in the operation of procedures. The report allows for those with vision and ambition, and for those who want to provide a valuable and important, yet limited, scope of activity.

I recommend the report, which was approved by the whole Committee, to the House.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I will begin by paying tribute to the work of the credit union movement, which continues to provide key services to communities right across the island of Ireland. The value of its work is more apparent than ever in the current economic climate, when affordable credit union and other financial services are almost impossible to access.

Over the past 40 years the credit union movement has assisted countless thousands of people, particularly those living in economically deprived communities and areas of social disadvantage. Known as the people's bank, the credit union helped those people access the kind of financial services that, until then, were completely unattainable. It is open to all, regardless of their economic circumstances, and I know from my own experience the high regard with which the credit union movement is held in the north-west, in places like Derry — I have not said “stand up for Derry” for quite a while — Omagh and Strabane.

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

The credit union movement should also be commended for the fact that it wants to increase the range of services that it offers to the people of our communities, and we

should assist it in doing so. However, the recent inquiry carried out by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment exposed a number of barriers that prevent credit unions in the North from offering similar financial services to their counterparts in England and the South of Ireland. Those barriers should be removed, and credit unions given the freedom to get on with providing enhanced services to their members. However, in approving the Committee's report, I would like to put on record Sinn Féin's position that the most effective way of assisting the credit unions and assisting our people is through the transfer of fiscal powers to the Assembly.

Of course, that will take time to achieve, and the report's alternative recommendation is that the credit unions here should come under the regulation of the Financial Services Authority, in order to allow them to offer expanded services. I stress that such an arrangement should be a strictly interim measure, pending the transfer of economic authority. The FSA presided over the collapse of the financial industry in Britain, and I doubt that many people here would have much faith in putting their financial future in the FSA's hands. It is far better that those responsibilities be in the hands of local representatives who come from and care about their communities, and not a flawed FSA or unelected and unaccountable British Ministers.

The report also recognises the need to provide assistance to credit unions in order to implement the expansion of their services. I reiterate that position, and stress that the credit unions should be given the required financial backing to achieve that aim. Furthermore, any credit unions that feel that they do not yet have the capacity or resources to provide additional services should not be compelled to do so. Instead, those credit unions should be supported and assisted until they reach the point at which they feel ready to take that step. Ultimately, that should be their decision.

If Members will pardon the pun, I will reiterate that we owe a huge debt to the credit union movement in Ireland. It has provided an invaluable service to countless thousands of people over the past four decades. If anyone is going to owe a debt to any organisation, there is probably none better than a credit union to owe it to. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Cree: It is difficult to follow the Chairperson of the Committee, because he usually covers all the points of the debate. Therefore, there was not much point in my sitting up until midnight last night to pen these few words.

Many people in the credit union movement in Northern Ireland have campaigned for a long time to have a range of services that are similar to those enjoyed by other groups in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and

Investment spent considerable time taking evidence and consulting all the important stakeholders. The impediments to the expansion of credit union services were identified and explained at some length. As the Chairperson said, four distinct options were developed, and all parties agreed that option 4 was preferred. That would enable the necessary outcomes to be achieved quickly and match the services provided elsewhere.

However, I recognise that assistance must be given to local credit unions for the necessary retraining that will allow them to move forward. Some of the smaller unions may wish to stay as they are, and offer limited services. Others want to expand and offer a wider range of services. We recommend that the Financial Services Authority open an office in Northern Ireland, staffed with people who have an understanding of the credit union movement and the necessary regulatory arrangements.

The credit union movement has grown over the past 50 years, and has a bright future in Northern Ireland. The only note of caution that I wish to express is on the reinvestment of assets into community enterprises, which will necessitate new skills and competences. Investments may be subject to more risk, but with proper training, I see no reason why credit unions should not develop those skills so that significant benefits can be brought to communities. I support the report and recommend it to the House.

Mr Neeson: First, along with other Members, I thank the Committee staff and all those who assisted us in developing our inquiry.

In April and May 2008, when we decided to carry out the inquiry, I believed that the Committee might have had greater priorities. However, events have overtaken us, and I now acknowledge that our timing could not have been better.

There are more than 180 credit unions in Northern Ireland, with around 408,000 members and assets totalling £820 million. Originally perceived as a largely nationalist movement, I am pleased to say that there are now many facilities in unionist and other areas as well.

6.00 pm

The credit unions of Northern Ireland, in evidence to the Committee, said that they believed that their services were rather restricted when compared with those that their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and in other areas of the UK provide. Larne Credit Union Ltd reflected that belief in a written submission to the Committee. It said:

“Credit unions do not come under the control of the FSA as in the case of England or IFSRA in the Republic of Ireland. This can cause difficulties for credit unions as the freedom of the Registrar in Northern Ireland to act is limited under the powers given to NI by Westminster. This means, for example, that credit unions in NI are

unable to offer Repayment Protection Insurance to members, a service which is available to members in the Republic.”

During the inquiry, the Committee decided, rightly, to meet the administrator of the Presbyterian Mutual Society in private session to discuss the situation. Many of my constituents have been affected adversely by the problems of the society; therefore, it was right that the Committee did that.

One of our priorities was to determine the extent of regulation in Northern Ireland. One of the Committee’s recommendations is that the registration of Northern Ireland credit unions remains with DETI Companies Registry, but that regulation should move from DETI Companies Registry to the FSA to enable credit unions to deliver a wider range of services to their members. I acknowledge the recent controversy regarding the FSA, and although I have some reservations, I still believe that that is the best move to make so that services can be expanded.

Another recommendation is that DETI and the FSA work with the credit union movement to retain credit union staff, who will be operating under the new regulatory arrangements and using the new services.

The Committee also recommends that credit unions here should be able to provide the facilities for joint accounts and group membership — services that are not available in the UK. Contrary to my colleague Kieran McCarthy, I highlight the fact that the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions supports that option, but only as long as the FSA looks after credit unions as ably as DETI Companies Registry currently does.

The Committee believes that the appropriate reinvestment of assets by credit unions into community development and community enterprises can bring significant benefits to communities.

The inquiry has been very challenging, but we believe that the recommendations will bring about major changes for credit unions in Northern Ireland and provide greater opportunities, not only for the credit unions, but for their members. I support the recommendations and the report.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, I may have misled the House earlier with something that I said, so I want to get this confession out in the open. In a previous debate, I accused the Member for West Belfast Jennifer McCann of speaking for 14 minutes and 34 seconds. In fact, the clock was not reset when the Member started to speak and the time was 14.34. It may have seemed like she had spoken for 14 minutes and 34 seconds, but she had not; she finished speaking at 2.34 pm. I put right my remarks, because I noticed that a few Members were shocked by that scurrilous accusation, which I now withdraw. Members may want to frame this confession, because I do not think that it will happen again.

I was appointed to the Committee halfway through its deliberations, and I found the issue very interesting. I confess that I did not know an awful lot about the credit union movement before the inquiry started. I have to say that there is not a penny of Jim Wells's benevolent fund invested in any credit union, the few pence that I have are lodged in the Progressive Building Society or the Northern Bank.

Like other Members, I was very impressed by the breadth of experience and expertise that was exhibited by the credit union movement throughout Northern Ireland. What I found to be even more impressive was that an awful lot of the service is provided on a voluntary basis. Committees work for the greater good of the community throughout Northern Ireland. I was also impressed by the fact that it now extends throughout all the community in Northern Ireland; credit unions operate in almost every part of society. The existence of the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions means that it is a genuine cross-community movement.

The movement is very much a force for good. What I found particularly surprising was the sheer size of the amount of deposits that the various credit unions have — almost £800 million. That is an incredible bank balance for an organisation that has only been going for about 40 years. The credit unions have also demonstrated prudence in their lending over the past four decades. The financial markets have been through a period of unprecedented turmoil. Insurance companies, banks and stockbrokers have all gone to the wall. There have been all sorts of activities that, on closer examination, are not exactly to the credit of those who were involved. Even an organisation as august as the Presbyterian Mutual Society got itself into terribly difficult times.

Throughout that time, however, the credit union movement has remained untainted by any form of financial irregularity, which is very much to its credit. The 400,000 people in Northern Ireland who are members must have been reassured that while the storms were raging elsewhere, they could quietly and confidently expect that their savings in the credit unions were safe.

The movement has now grown to a stage, however, at which change is required to take account of the new economic realities and to provide a greater range of services and protection for the huge number of people who are members. My understanding is that the credit union movements — the two major federations and the separate group of 13 credit unions in Tyrone — are generally content with most of the report, but the issue of regulation has been highlighted.

That is a difficult issue. At the moment, it must be said that although the Department registers credit

unions, it does not exercise the same regulatory role as the FSA. The Committee's proposal is balanced. It was unanimously accepted that there would be a light touch. Paragraph 10 of the report is crucial. It states:

“the Committee acknowledges that many individual credit unions are content with current regulatory arrangements and have no desire to expand the range of services they offer. The Committee is reassured in this regard, by evidence from the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd (ABCUL)”.

That organisation complied with the FSA. The report states that a light touch will be applied to individual unions — they will be able to remain very much as they were. However, the larger unions that wish to offer a wider range of services will come under the umbrella of the FSA.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Wells: Recently, the FSA has, frankly, not provided a great amount of protection, but at least there is now reassurance for investors about the protection scheme.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome today's debate and the report into the credit union movement. I declare an interest as a member of my local credit union for the past 20 years. Today's report and this debate follows on from a long-standing grievance that the credit union movement here has had over many years about the unfair way in which the range of services that it offers compares to its counterparts in Britain and the South of Ireland.

Deposit taking is allowed in credit unions in Britain and the South, but not here. The same is true of the transfer of securities and group society membership.

The task before us is to consider how credit unions might expand the range of services that they offer to include current accounts, deposits, mortgages, insurance, ATMs, and so forth.

As the Irish League of Credit Unions said, credit unions are not banks, and they are not seeking to become banks, but they wish to use current banking technology to offer the financial services that their members want.

Some Members spoke about the credit union movement, which has been in existence here for the past 50 years, during which time it has reached out, in particular, to people in disadvantaged communities who have been financially excluded and are not used to using the banking system. As Mark Durkan, the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, said, credit unions have assets in the region of £800 million, and they have been able to provide loans at reasonable rates, ensuring that people in disadvantaged communities do not steer themselves towards doorstep moneylenders who charge exorbitant rates. Credit unions have reduced financial exclusion

and have assisted families on low incomes, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

The Minister should take on board the range of services that the Committee believes credit unions could provide, including the growth fund, which the British Government established in order to reach out to people who are financially excluded and whom credit unions in Britain can access. We have the lowest uptake of the child trust fund; credit unions here argue that if people from disadvantaged areas were able to access the child trust fund, more of them would avail themselves of it. Furthermore, in 2010, the British Government will introduce the saving gateway scheme, whereby the Government will match every pound that people save, and that scheme could be included in the extended range of services that credit unions can offer.

Members of the Committee expressed concerns about the most appropriate regulatory regime. A dilemma arises under the present legislation, because regulatory powers must come from the FSA, which has cost implications for the credit union movement. Therefore, I hope that the Minister will consider that matter, because the FSA, for example, does not even have an office here. Furthermore, although some credit unions are run professionally, others are not, so training would be needed to bring standards up to the required level of competency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Butler: I support the report, and I hope that the Minister takes on board its recommendations. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I am pleased to have been part of the Committee and to have my name associated with the report, which is one of the best reports — if not the best report — with which I have been involved since being elected to the Assembly. Furthermore, I wish to praise the Chairperson, who was the driving force behind the Committee's investigation into this matter.

There are several reasons why I consider the report to be the best one with which I have been involved. Personally, the inquiry has been a great educational experience. Much like Mr Wells, my detailed knowledge of credit unions was limited. Indeed, if Members look at page 10 in the report, they will see that it is blank, so that page could have been indexed as the sum total of my detailed knowledge of the credit union movement at the beginning of the inquiry.

In addition, the report is good because there is a good prospect that its recommendations will be acted on. Sometimes, reports produced in the Assembly have little or no chance of being acted on, and this report's recommendations might actually be taken up by the powers that be.

6.15 pm

The Committee has been considering the subject for approximately 18 months, and if ever there were a need for the services that we are seeking, it has been highlighted by the economic downturn that has developed during that period. The credit union movement is important in helping people to get over some of the problems created by the downturn.

The importance of the credit union movement was drawn for me very starkly when the Irish League of Credit Unions gave evidence to the Committee that highlighted, as has been mentioned before, that the uptake of child trust funds in Northern Ireland is very poor in comparison with the rest of the UK. Even in my constituency, which Mr Wells repeatedly tells me is very affluent, the take-up was approximately 60%, meaning that 40% of those eligible did not take it up. That figure is worse in some areas — in parts of Belfast or in Londonderry, take-up is only about 50%. Therefore, there was bad take-up of that relatively simple benefit, and many of us believe that if credit unions could offer that service, more of those who could take up that benefit would do so.

The level of financial literacy in Northern Ireland is very poor also; again, it is among some of the worst in the UK. There is a very real need for — and benefit in — the credit union movement getting involved in providing more services that could address that problem.

We have heard about the market share that credit unions have in Northern Ireland, in comparison to GB. Give the critical mass that is required, there is a real possibility that if more services are offered to people in lower socio-economic demographic groups, that problem could be addressed in some way.

The key recommendation in the report is that registration remain with DETI and regulation be performed by the FSA. That recommendation was unanimously agreed by the Committee. Given the predicament that we are in, I can understand some of the hesitation that some people have when they hear the words “financial services authority” put together. However, in producing the report, the Committee considered absolutely every option. We considered some options that we thought would be good but were unworkable for one reason or another. When hardy came to hardy, that arrangement was the option that could, on the one hand, provide us with the services and let credit unions provide those services on the ground, and on the other hand, maintain the necessary level of regulation.

The Committee examined absolutely everything; therefore, I find it somewhat peculiar that Martina Anderson, on behalf of Sinn Féin, sought to criticise that for some reason. Her colleagues on the Committee wisely supported the report and did not object to it in

any way. It may come as news to her — in seeking to have some sort of financial services authority for here or contemplating whether we should be covered by the Financial Regulator in the South — that many of the financial institutions in the Republic that have an Irish face and are Irish-owned are, actually, regulated by the FSA. Therefore, some of the points that were being made for, clearly, Brit-bashing reasons need to be examined in the cold, hard light of where we are, and in the context of the need for credit unions to get more services so that they can help their members.

As other Members have mentioned, I appreciate that there are smaller credit unions in Northern Ireland that may be somewhat scared by the recommendations in the report. That is why the recommendations outlined at the back of the report regarding a FSA presence in Belfast, some training and financial support, and the lighter touch that regulation should take, are all the more critical. Implementing that may take some time, it may be something that those credit unions need some support and help with; however, the report is very worthwhile and I am very pleased to be associated with it.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Chairperson, my colleagues, and the staff of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for their hard work on the report.

Credit unions provide a very useful service to society. However, in light of the financial developments that have occurred over the past few months, it is difficult to see how credit unions and industrial and provident societies will be able to continue unregulated and unprotected. It is fair to say that most credit unions welcome the opportunity to extend their services to the community. They welcome, in particular, the opportunity to help people to save, and as my colleagues have mentioned, it is very important that we encourage everyone to start saving, given the current economic climate.

However, there is a need for clearer rules and greater protection for savers. My Committee colleagues have covered most of the detail, but I want to particularly highlight several issues. The first is the change in Northern Ireland whereby groups will be able to join credit unions. That is important because groups such as the Scouts, football clubs and small groups that hitherto have not been able to save with the credit union will be able to do so, which will be beneficial to society generally. The ability of credit unions to help the local economy through supporting community enterprise is another useful development.

The proposals may be a challenge to the smaller credit unions, and some of them have made representations to the Committee. My colleague Sam Gardiner was giving me a hard time earlier about some people who had been in touch with him and who were worried

about the FSA coming in with a heavy hand. However, we have had assurances on several fronts, and colleagues have mentioned that today. As is the case in GB, we are likely to see a lighter touch for those credit unions that do not want to expand too much, and a tighter regulatory system for those that want to become further involved in issues.

If the recommendations are accepted, there will be a need for equipment and training, and the possibility of financial support, for those credit unions that will come under the new regime. It is good for the FSA to come here, and it was suggested that we might be able to staff the FSA here with staff seconded from DETI, that is, the staff who currently deal with credit unions. Those staff are used to dealing with credit unions and the credit unions are used to dealing with them. Perhaps some system could be found so that if credit union staff telephoned to ask for advice, they would be talking to the friendly voice of someone they know.

If the proposals are handled sensitively, they will give credit unions a major opportunity to move on, change, expand and produce a much better service to the community. I commend the proposals to the House.

Dr McDonnell: I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate on the Committee's inquiry into the role and potential of credit unions. I thank everyone who contributed to the production of the report — the Chairperson, Committee colleagues and everyone who gave evidence. To my mind, their insight was invaluable in helping the Committee to produce the package of recommendations.

Credit unions in Northern Ireland are an integral part of the local communities that they serve. I am told that one in four of our population is a member of a credit union, which is an awful lot of people. It is a much higher figure than in Great Britain, and our credit unions are smaller, more local and community-based, and they connect with people. The norm in Britain is for credit unions to be large and somewhat anonymous. Unfortunately, despite that, Northern Ireland credit unions are much more restricted in the range of services that they can provide to their customers.

I never cease to be amazed at the substantial contribution that credit unions make, not just to financial stability, but to social stability and social justice, in the communities and neighbourhoods that they serve. They provide a vital financial lifeline, especially to the many people in areas of multiple deprivation who cannot get credit from the larger high-street banks or who cannot afford to pay the excessive and crippling bank charges that we are now forced to pay.

People without access to credit unions are frighteningly vulnerable to the circling loan sharks and others who could rip them off. Credit unions have done a fantastic

job in combating poverty and empowering those on the edge of poverty. However, compared to the Republic of Ireland or Britain, credit unions here have been hampered, restricted and inhibited from providing the service that they could, and should, be allowed to provide to local communities because of the constraints of the regulatory system.

Eight of the recommendations contained in the report go a considerable way towards changing the regulatory arrangements, enabling credit unions to provide a much expanded and effective range of services, and at the very least, the same range of services provided by credit unions in Britain — if they wish to do so. We will not, and should not, force the smaller, weaker, or less-well-organised credit unions out of their depth. However, the strength of these recommendations is that they leave the choice of the range of services that credit unions might provide with the individual credit union, enshrining a degree of autonomy.

There is no need for me to go into the detail of each and every recommendation. That has been done thoroughly already by the Chairperson and by other colleagues who have spoken.

However, it is important to emphasise that we must do all that we can to implement the recommendations swiftly. In that way, those credit unions that are significantly restricted in the services that they can offer will be able to expand their services if they wish to do so, thereby delivering more effective outcomes for the local communities that badly need their efforts and energy. For far too long, credit unions here have been left to operate under unnecessary restrictions. For far too long, they have lagged behind their counterparts in the South and in Britain, and their ability to serve their communities has suffered.

The community-based, self-help ethos of credit unions is invaluable. It resonates with people, reaches out to them and mobilises them. It is estimated that more than 6% of households in Northern Ireland have no savings and do not even have a bank account. As neighbours and local social activists, credit union staff understand their customers and their neighbours' needs. The credit union movement is a trusted community brand, and it is ideally placed to reach those who find themselves financially excluded and marginalised.

Not only do the credit unions offer fair and reasonable credit rates, but they promote sensible money management and help to nurture a culture of saving, investment and financial responsibility — a culture that very much needs to be nurtured in today's economic climate. Our local communities, urban and rural, will significantly benefit from those recommendations if, and when, they are implemented. They will strengthen the role and the services that the credit unions can provide.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Dr McDonnell: It is important to state that we would never suggest that our credit unions should simply develop into organisations that have parity with, or are similar to, high-street banks. The great strength of credit unions is their community ethos and their not-for-profit democratic operation. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate. As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I know a bit about credit unions. My father was a founding member of the credit union in Lisnaskea. It started off in a small hut, but over the years, it moved to a very fine building. That credit union was established around 40 years ago, and the community that it serves has benefited enormously from it, as has Enniskillen.

Over the past few weeks, I have spoken to people who work in that area, and they have told me that they know about the Committee's inquiry and are very supportive of it. The aim is to try to get those people on to a level playing field with those in credit unions in England, Scotland and Wales or, indeed, in the Twenty-six Counties.

Table 2, on page 13 of the Committee's report, compares the services provided by credit unions here and elsewhere. As a place that obviously has no sovereignty, our credit unions clearly lag behind those elsewhere; other places have a certain amount of sovereignty, which makes all the difference. That is but one of the many areas in which we lag behind, as Alasdair McDonnell and the Committee Chairperson noted.

The changes that the report recommends must be implemented as soon as possible. The report must not be allowed to become one of the many that sit on a shelf, achieving nothing over the years. Implementation of its recommendations would bring enormous benefits for people. Given the present economic situation, people need to be able to borrow small amounts of money from people whom they can trust. Indeed, one of the great advantages of credit unions is that even if a person cannot make payments, they are not penalised. That does not happen in other financial organisations, such as banks. Bank customers who cannot repay their loans come to grief.

Another difference between banks and credit unions is that it costs a lot more to borrow a small amount from a bank. For a short-term loan of around £2,000 or £4,000, the interest rate is 18%, or even more. The credit union rate for that sort of loan is completely different. People should realise that they can make enormous savings by borrowing from credit unions.

We should encourage people to get involved in their local credit unions, not only to work for them in a

voluntary capacity, but to encourage their kids to start saving with them. That is one of the main things that credit unions have going for them — the idea of having savings and then paying back the loans with a declining total amount. That is where the big savings are.

The Irish League of Credit Unions is, and always has been, very strong in the Twenty-six Counties. There is a very close relationship between the credit unions that are part of the Irish League of Credit Unions and other credit unions in the North. Urgent work by Ministers and Departments on behalf of those credit unions is required so that there is a level playing field in the provision of affordable credit for people in our local communities.

6.30 pm

The other benefit of credit unions is that local communities know what their people want, and they work in support of local groups and enterprise organisations that need amounts of money up to £15,000. Attaining such credit in a safe way is a tremendous advantage for those communities.

Option 4 is the correct one. I thank the Committee staff, the Chairperson and all those who worked hard to bring the report to its fruition. People involved in credit unions have been waiting for this change for many years. Addressing the role and potential of credit unions is one of the most positive measures that the Assembly has taken in the past few months. I commend and support the Committee's report. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I, too, welcome the publication of the first report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment following the completion of its inquiry into the role and potential of credit unions in Northern Ireland. I join other Members in thanking the Committee's Chairperson, members and staff for the time and effort that they expended during the inquiry. I also thank the wide range of interested organisations that took the time to both write, of which there were many, and present evidence to the Committee. I will not respond in detail to the specifics of the report, but I will give it my detailed consideration and respond more fully to the Committee's request for views on its recommendations by early April at the latest.

I have listened to, and am grateful for, Members' contributions to the debate. There is clearly much cross-party and cross-community agreement on the important role of credit unions in society in Northern Ireland. The Department has long recognised that for many members of society, particularly those on low incomes, local credit unions continue to be prime sources of affordable credit. The long-established and widespread presence of the credit union movement in

Northern Ireland has been crucial in helping to engender a strong culture of community self-help and to promote financial inclusion, including tackling problem areas such as loan sharking, to which the Chairperson referred.

The Department views credit unions as an integral part of the broader social-economy sector in Northern Ireland, and the movement's contribution was assessed as part of the Department's first survey of social-economy enterprises in 2007. There are some 180 credit unions in Northern Ireland, and the representative body for the social-economy sector — the Social Enterprise Network — continues to strengthen its links with the movement and has helped to give many credit unions the opportunity to publish their services to a wider audience of potential members.

Credit unions have held a special place in society in Northern Ireland for a long time — we heard that the first credit union was established in Londonderry in 1960. However, as the report makes clear, and as Members are only too aware, since 2002, our credit unions have differed in a major way from their counterparts in Great Britain, which were brought under the regulatory umbrella of the Financial Services Authority.

Historically, registration and regulatory responsibility for credit unions in Northern Ireland have been a devolved matter. Legislation was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1969 to enable credit unions to acquire corporate legal status and create the trusted brand image that the movement enjoys to this day. That brand image value is underpinned by the fact that over 90% of credit union members belong to a credit union that is affiliated to one of the two representative bodies — the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions — which both operate their own membership funded savings-protection scheme.

That legislative framework worked well for the ensuing decades when the movement developed and spread across Northern Ireland. Most of that early development related to membership numbers; more recently, it has related to the scale of funds managed in the unions.

As the report acknowledges, my Department has been able to accommodate a large number of the credit union movement's aspirations, including maximum permissible loan amounts, repayment periods, junior saver limits and the maximum number of shares that a member can hold. The Northern Ireland registrar has also played a pivotal role in the introduction of a new range of enhanced services for credit union members, from the direct paying in of benefits and pensions to the paying out of money and bills by debit card and PayPoint. However, as the report highlights, the Department does not have the statutory authority to approve the introduction and deployment of financial products and services, such as insurance and mortgage

products, which are reserved and regulated by the Financial Services Authority, nor can it do anything to help to approve individual credit unions as providers of child trust fund accounts.

Some Members, including Mr Butler, made the point that Northern Ireland has a lack of uptake of child trust funds. However, it is important to remember that if parents do not take up the trust funds, the Government invest them directly on behalf of the child. Therefore, no funds are actually lost, but they may be placed in a building society in GB, for example. Nevertheless, the point was well made about the uptake in Northern Ireland.

The Committee's report has confirmed that a widening gap exists between the range of products and services that can be delivered to members of credit unions in Northern Ireland and those that are available to members of credit unions in Great Britain. I accept the report's conclusion that Northern Ireland's credit unions are now lagging behind their counterparts in Great Britain in the range of financial products and services that they can offer, even though — and this point was well made by the Chairperson — the Northern Ireland movement has been longer established and has a population penetration of 50%, as opposed to 2% in Great Britain. That is a startling statistic, and it is a point that was well made. Upcoming changes —

Mr Shannon: Part of the credit unions' success story has been the ethos that they are run by the community, for the community. That has ensured their success across the whole community. The credit unions in Portaferry and Kircubbin are members of the Irish League of Credit Unions, and they are examples of that success story. There are also success stories in the Orange Halls in Newtownards, Comber and Greyabbey, which help to ensure that people can get access to credit unions and to funds.

The issue of social inclusion has not been mentioned. There must —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. An intervention should be just that — an intervention. It should last for a short time. Will the Member come to a conclusion?

Mr Shannon: I will come to a conclusion now. I thank the Deputy Speaker for his guidance, and I appreciate it.

Does the Minister agree that social inclusion in relation to credit unions is very important? Does she also agree that credit unions provide an opportunity for social inclusion? Hopefully, the new legislation will do likewise.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Credit unions offer much more to society than the sum of their parts. They provide a very worthwhile service to all sections of society. However, upcoming changes in Great Britain's legislation on credit unions

will further increase the gap unless we act now in relation to regulation.

The inquiry demonstrated that increasing the range of products and services offered in Northern Ireland's credit unions is widely supported by a broad range of key stakeholders. My view is that credit unions that are willing to offer, and capable of offering, an enhanced range of financial services and products to their members should be enabled to do so. However, as the report makes clear, that can only happen if they are regulated by the Financial Services Authority. I heard the comments that were made in relation to the authority, but, as it stands, unless the credit unions are regulated by the FSA, they will not be able to offer that range of services. I know that the Irish League of Credit Unions has some difficulties with that, because it has built up a very good relationship with the officials in DETI.

I want to pay tribute to the officials in Companies Registry for establishing that close relationship with all the credit unions throughout Northern Ireland. That is something of which we should be proud.

I endorse the view that credit unions that do not want to go down the route of full regulation should be free to carry on providing their core savings-and-loan services to members. That is a sensible proposal from the Committee. The Financial Inclusion Taskforce in Great Britain recognised the significant role that credit unions can play in promoting financial well-being, and in Northern Ireland the credit union movement has the potential to make an equally, if not more, significant contribution, provided that current barriers can be overcome. Officials have worked closely with all sections of the movement in the past and, in so doing, have developed a professional working relationship with the sector. They will continue to work with and facilitate it as long as it is prudent, sound and acts in the best interests of individual members.

The report recognises that the option of doing nothing is not viable, given the breadth and depth of support for change and expansion of credit union services and the potential benefits that it can bring to communities and individuals. The four main options identified in the report are comprehensive: they are clearly explained and have been fully considered. My officials and I will give full and careful consideration to each of the options and the recommendations contained in the report.

There is also recognition that any change will require significant commitment from the stakeholders, not least, from the credit unions themselves. The report proposes that support will also be required with regard to financial assistance, advice and training to meet the transitional and development requirements necessary to ensure success. Those will need to be looked at

carefully. It will be necessary to explore whether financial support can be made available to assist in that.

In his pre-Budget report to Parliament in November 2008, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the Treasury would undertake a review of all mutual societies in Northern Ireland. As a part of its review, it will be looking at the regulation of Northern Ireland credit unions, taking account of the importance of mutual societies to the Northern Ireland financial sector and drawing on good practice in other regions and countries. I am sure that the Committee's report will be particularly useful to the Treasury's investigation into the way forward for the Northern Ireland credit union movement.

I thank the Committee Chairperson, members and staff, and all the witnesses and contributors for their invaluable input. My officials and I welcome the report and believe its recommendations are extremely timely. I am sorry that Mr Neeson had to leave; he indicated to me that he would have to do so. I am reminded of the politician who said that politics are about "Events, dear boy, events." At the time, Mr Neeson said that he did not think it necessarily the most important issue to bring before the Committee: I have to say that the inquiry has been extremely important and most helpful.

I pay tribute to the credit union movement in Northern Ireland and to the vital role it plays in society in support of what the Executive seek to do, particularly in promoting financial inclusion by, for example, providing an alternative to expensive doorstep credit to which Members have referred and tackling loan sharking about which, unfortunately, we hear more and more during the economic downturn.

I conclude with Mr Shannon's point that credit unions encourage greater community self-sufficiency and inclusion. I am very happy to receive the report.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Ms J McCann): Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to restate the Committee's appreciation to all who contributed to the inquiry. We are grateful to everyone who provided written evidence, including Assembly colleagues, community groups and individual credit unions, and particularly to St Matthew's Primary School in the Short Strand. Its submission highlighted the school's scheme to encourage people to become lifelong savers in their local credit union and to steer them away from high-interest doorstep lenders.

We also thank those who appeared before the Committee to give evidence, including both the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions. They provided the Committee with a valuable insight into what the credit union movement needs from Government in order to forward its goal of

providing the financial services that our communities need so much.

6.45 pm

The written and oral submissions received have been invaluable in assisting the Committee to reach its conclusions and come up with the recommendations in the report.

In his opening remarks, the Chairperson, Mark Durkan, highlighted the importance of the credit union movement, its long history, its deep rooted involvement in our communities, and the reliance that so many people have on credit unions. He spoke of the credit unions' inability to meet the needs of their members due to the legislative constraints placed upon them. Now, more than ever, in the current recession, those barriers must be removed in order to allow people access to the financial services that they need and to make financial exclusion a thing of the past.

The Chairperson also explained how the expansion of services to include the depositing of child trust funds would help to encourage a higher level of take-up of those funds, which, in some areas in the North, is only at the rate of 50%. He listed the options for change in the report, outlining option 4 as the preferred option.

Robin Newton also outlined the importance of credit unions and explained that people who cannot get credit from banks can go to credit unions. He also pointed out that lack of services prevented people from getting what they needed from credit unions, and he talked about how the appropriate reinvestment of assets into local communities could help to develop those local communities.

My colleague Martina Anderson said that, due to the economic climate, the credit union is more important than ever: she quite rightly called it the people's bank. She also spoke about social inclusion. Simon Hamilton, in a reference to her comments, raised the issue of FSA regulation. Martina was outlining some of the concerns that other Members have outlined and, indeed, that the Irish League of Credit Unions has also outlined.

Leslie Cree said that although the Committee agreed with option 4, assistance would be needed by credit unions, and for the opening of an FSA office. He also warned that credit unions must be cautious about reinvestment opportunities.

Sean Neeson quoted Larne Credit Union Ltd, which stated that current regulation is standing in its way and is preventing it from providing certain services. He asked DETI to work with credit union staff to assist in the transfer to FSA regulation.

Jim Wells praised the voluntary aspect of credit unions, highlighting that people who work there do so on a voluntary basis. He credited the movement for its

history and for the fact that it has never become involved in any economic crisis. He said that most people are generally content with the majority of the report; however, he pointed out that some people have concerns around regulation.

My colleague Paul Butler said that inequality exists and that there is a disparity in the range of services available from credit unions. He talked about the different services that could be made available, such as current accounts, ATM services, and the depositing of child trust funds. He demonstrated how credit unions have reached out to people in areas of disadvantage and need, and he talked about the development of some credit unions in England through the operation of a growth fund.

Simon Hamilton said that the key recommendation of the report was that registration should remain within DETI and that regulation should go to the FSA. Alan McFarland said that helping to build the local economy was a very welcome development but argued that there is a need for training, particularly around the staffing of an FSA office. He suggested that perhaps staff from DETI could be seconded.

Alasdair McDonnell pointed out that one in four people here are members of a credit union, and that the movement created social stability and social justice. People who cannot get loans from banks or other financial institutions can get loans from credit unions and, he argued, the expansion of the service would go a long way to help introduce people to a culture of saving.

Gerry McHugh said that bringing credit unions up to the same level of services that those in the South of Ireland and in Britain have would create an even playing field and would encourage people, particularly children and young people, to become more involved in the culture of saving.

I thank the Minister for her constructive and supportive comments; the Committee will welcome her commitment to ensuring that credit unions are able to develop and expand their services. I particularly welcome the fact that she said that she will come back by early April at the latest and that she mentioned financial inclusion. She also mentioned loan sharks, and that is an important point because, as a result of the economic climate, people have been exploited by loan sharks.

The Minister pointed out that registration and regulation has always been a reserved matter. The report highlights the fact that the Department does not have the authority to grant some of the expanded services that some credit unions were seeking, for instance the depositing of child trust funds. Jim Shannon, in his short intervention, — *[Laughter.]* — mentioned the benefits of social inclusion, and that is an important point.

The Minister said that the inquiry has demonstrated that credit unions that are willing to take up enhanced services can be regulated by only the FSA, but she went on to praise the working relationship that credit unions have had with DETI's Companies Registry. That is an important point, because, in all the evidence that the Committee heard from the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions, those bodies said that they enjoyed a good relationship with DETI's Companies Registry. It is important that, if the change takes place, it does so in an atmosphere similar to the type of working relationship that exists.

The Minister said that she would give full and careful consideration to the options, and she mentioned that she would consider providing financial assistance. Another important point is that the credit unions can choose whether to go down the route of providing expanded services. The Minister said that, if the credit unions chose to do that, she hoped to be able to offer training and advice. She mentioned that all of the stakeholders, including the credit unions, will have challenges ahead.

The debate was helpful, and some good conclusions came out of it. The main issues are that significant moves towards combating financial exclusion here and towards expanding services are important. I commend the report to the House, and I ask Members to support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (05/08/09) on its inquiry into the role and potential of credit unions in Northern Ireland.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Magilligan to Greencastle Car Ferry

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Dallat: I am grateful for the opportunity to have the Adjournment debate, and I cannot emphasise enough the seriousness of the topic, namely the Greencastle to Magilligan ferry service, which has been operating since 2002. Indeed, later this year, if it is still operating, the service will have carried two million passengers. Five years ago, the ferry service was operating with a subvention of €156,000.

By December 2007, that had fallen to €75,123, forcing the operators to increase a single-journey fare from an initial £5 to £10. That had an immediate negative impact and resulted in a drop in the number of cars carried from 90,866 in 2007 to 63,405 in the year that has just ended.

The Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service is an important part of the North Atlantic tourism corridor, which is the critical passage that links the Causeway Coast with the north-west. The service is fundamental to the development of sustainable tourism, not just along the Causeway Coast, but to Northern Ireland as a whole because it is, in effect, the bridge that enables international tourists to enter Northern Ireland from north Donegal. Many visitors travel to Malin Head, Glenveagh and other places of interest, before making the crossing to the Causeway Coast, where the main attraction for international tourists is the Giant's Causeway and other tourism honeypots, such as the Bushmills distillery.

Given the present economic crisis in the North and the South, it is unthinkable to allow that ferry service to die at a time when the only growth industry that we have is tourism, which is expected to increase, for various reasons, over the next decade. The ferry service is the product of people who had the vision to see the bigger picture. One of them was my late colleague in the Assembly Arthur Doherty, who never gave up, and finally accomplished his dream of having the link that would bring new prosperity to his beloved Magilligan and, of course, to the Inishowen Peninsula.

What a shame it would be if, at this moment of unequalled challenge, that umbilical cord were to be

cut. Once severed, I believe that it would be extremely difficult to put it together again, and years of hard work would be lost for a very long time.

The bottom line is that the service needs substantial subvention in order to operate in a way that allows it to meet its overheads, which have increased substantially. Those overheads include public liability insurance, which has risen tenfold, while the cost of dry docking to comply with safety inspections is around £90,000. How that subvention is to be found is a challenge to both Governments. Although no one underestimates the financial difficulties that our Governments currently face, I do not believe that there is any choice but to continue with the medium- and long-term challenge of developing sustainable tourism in one of the most beautiful parts of this island, which is unequalled in history, culture and music, and is a critical part of the tourist triangle that includes the west coast of Scotland and the Scottish islands.

I acknowledge that the ferry service has survived on small but greatly appreciated subventions from Limavady Borough Council and from Donegal County Council. However, I believe that it is the duty of Governments to take responsibility for ferry services, and, by and large, that is what happens. Indeed, I know of no ferry service in the North or South that is not subsidised, and some to a degree much greater than that which is needed in order to maintain the Magilligan to Greencastle service.

The contract under which the service operates runs out in June of this year. As yet, no provision has been made to resolve the shortfall. The current operators have stated publicly that they could not continue, and it is difficult to see why any potential operator would tender for a contract that is a money loser. Indeed, I believe that it is fair to claim that there would be no takers, which is why I tabled this topic for debate. I have no preference for who operates the service. I simply want to ensure that it continues.

At present, the authorities North and South are fully aware of the issue. Our own Minister for Regional Development has been written to, and a meeting requested. I have just been told that that meeting will take place next week. Indeed, I welcome the Minister, Conor Murphy, to the debate.

7.00 pm

The Republic's Finance Minister has been asked whether he would directly facilitate a meeting with the Special EU Programmes Body. The North/South Ministerial Council has, equally, been made aware of the matter's urgency. In that respect, I accept that the North/South Ministerial Council has no direct function in the assessment of individual projects' applications. However, that does not mean that it has no function at

all. Its very name suggests that it has a legitimate interest, given that this is a cross-border matter.

Members will be aware that the Special EU Programmes Body is the managing authority for the Peace III and INTERREG IVA EU-funded cross-border programmes. The INTERREG programme for 2007-2013 has allocated indicative budgets to various themes whose eligible area comprises Northern Ireland, the South's border counties and western Scotland. That includes a tourism theme that has an allocation of €30 million and a rural development theme that has an allocation of €10 million.

Unfortunately, the tourism theme is currently closed for applications and most of its budget has already been committed in principle. I have been reliably informed that the rural development theme will be open for applications later in 2009. That may offer an opportunity for funding the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service. However, I am concerned that none of that is of any immediate value, given that, as I have said, the contract runs out in June 2009.

In other words, a crisis looms at a time when tourism in the north-west cannot afford a major setback. The area has already suffered a disproportionate number of job losses on both sides of the border, particularly in East Derry, where the Seagate closure alone cost around 1,000 jobs.

Given that the topic has now been aired in both Stormont and Dáil Éireann, I hope that a way will be found to provide the subvention that is clearly needed to enable the service to survive and prosper. A long-term view of needs in around 10 years' time is required. Malin Head may not be in the same league as Land's End or John O'Groats — which is, perhaps, a good thing — however, it will develop to become a major draw for international tourists. Likewise, the Causeway Coast will receive major investment when the current economic recession is out of the way. Investors will have learned to put their money in long-term sustainable projects and not the kind of speculative, high-risk projects that have brought so much heartache in recent times.

The development of waterways, which would bring tourists from the Shannon and the Erne along the Ulster Canal, and all the way down the Lower Bann to the Causeway Coast, means that the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service will take on a critical role in the movement of people around the island of Ireland in numbers never before imagined.

Let us hope that the concerns expressed in the debate by me and other Members will be taken seriously and that time will not run out. In the darkest of times, the ferry service is one piece of positive evidence in the north-west that matters can move forward; that we will not lie down and accept the situation, but will fight for

a project that is well worth maintaining. That is not just in the interest of the current generation who struggle to survive on tourism during one of the worst economic periods in history; we must make every effort to ensure that a future generation will have the confidence to invest in tourism and thereby create hundreds — indeed, thousands — of well-paid, sustainable jobs in the only growth industry in Northern Ireland.

We ask for the Assembly's help and appeal to the Dublin Government to act immediately in unison with the Executive on this most crucial issue.

Mr Campbell: I rise to speak as a constituency MLA in respect of the Adjournment topic. I congratulate the honourable Member for securing the topic for debate in the Assembly Chamber.

Mr Dallat rightly pointed out that the Greencastle to Magilligan ferry is a vital lifeline. Operations between Northern Ireland and the Republic are too often assessed parochially as narrow projects that affect only a finite and small geographical area. It would be completely wrong to view the lifeline of the ferry service in that way.

People who know the topography of the ferry landing point on the Northern Ireland side at Magilligan know that the approach road brings vehicle drivers along a narrow B-class road. That road goes past the prison and brings drivers to a T-junction.

Mr Dallat referred to Limavady Borough Council putting forward an amount of money. This is the month of the striking of rates, and, unfortunately, Limavady is at the upper end of the rates spectrum. I am sure that Limavady Borough Council would argue that it has put very significant moneys — hundreds of thousands of pounds — into the ferry service over a number of years.

I hope that the Minister will take the following point into account. A significant number — between 65% and 80% — of motorists coming from the Republic to Northern Ireland turn left rather than right when they reach the T-junction to which I referred. A left turn takes those motorists to the Causeway Coast, Bushmills and the tourist spots.

However, a right turn would take them to the town of the council that spends the money to support the ferry service in the first place. Therefore, there is understandably a degree of indignation on the part of people in Limavady. They have promoted the ferry service and put it in place with European aid and other assistance. It is a tremendous project and its benefits are spread right across the north coast, far beyond Limavady.

Limavady Borough Council has found that it simply cannot sustain the level of investment in the ferry service that it made previously. Therefore, the juncture that has been reached is not merely a T-junction, but a cul-de-sac. One hopes that the Minister and others can

establish whether there are funding opportunities that could maintain the ferry service.

The service provides a lifeline. It is a tourist hotspot, and the numbers that Mr Dallat outlined are very significant. Whichever way the variation in the fuel price goes — whether it is cheaper in Northern Ireland or cheaper in the Republic — there will be a two-way flow of traffic as people avail themselves of cheaper fuel.

A land journey of one hour and 10 minutes will have to be negotiated if the 15-minute ferry service is not maintained. I hope that the Minister will explore all the possible ways of sustaining the service for the greater good of all the people of the north coast and beyond. I know of many people from Donegal and further south who have come across on the ferry to spend several days in various parts of Northern Ireland. Everyone wins when the ferry service is in operation. Unfortunately, if a way of sustaining the service cannot be found, everyone will lose.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I was involved in the development of the ferry service from the very beginning. I was a member of the Limavady-Donegal steering committee during the construction of the slipway at Magilligan and the awarding of the tender to Mr Jim McClenaghan of the Lough Foyle Ferry Company. Therefore, I have a particular interest in this matter. Indeed, I have a much wider interest in the entire Magilligan area.

As John Dallat said, it is definitely one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland, yet it has been allowed to remain a desert. Why are people not inclined to turn right to visit Limavady? There are hundreds of acres available to develop, sensitively, the area where the ferry lands at the slipway and where one can take the 10-minute journey from Greencastle to Magilligan. Binevenagh — one of the most remarkable mountains one will ever see — looks down on that area, which is the greatest strand in Ireland, with miles of beautiful golden sand. Furthermore, Lough Foyle is ideal for water sports.

As Gregory Campbell said, anyone who turns right towards Limavady or anywhere else will — in one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland — pass the prison and, a few metres further along, a British Army firing range. When a decision was being made to build the new prison, I worked as hard as possible to prevent it from being situated in Magilligan. I spoke passionately to Paul Goggins — obviously, not passionately enough — and, although he understood my argument, the decision was, unfortunately, based on economics rather than sense or the potential despoliation of a beautiful area, and the decision was taken to build a prison.

At that time, I dealt with people in Magilligan who had expertise in landscaping, and so on. One person generously offered to provide a landscape of the entire

area. The next time I meet Mr Goggins, I might show him that landscape. Unfortunately, in the meantime, Mr Goggins announced that he will build a beautiful prison in beautiful Magilligan. I am sure that Jim McClenaghan from the Lough Foyle Ferry Company considered what people from Greencastle and Donegal see when they look across the lough: they see a wasteland. People on the Magilligan side who look across to Greencastle see fishing boats, a harbour, a lovely village and a famous seafood restaurant. It is a lovely place. There is nothing on the Magilligan side to invite people.

When negotiations on the development of the ferry were almost finished, the tender had already been awarded to Mr McClenaghan. At a meeting in Greencastle, an officer from Limavady Borough Council asked officials from Donegal about sharing security costs. There was a stunned silence in the room, particularly among the Donegal representatives. When one official eventually got his breath back, he asked what that meant and was told that security was essential. The Donegal representatives said that they were not interested in security and would not build a security zone or employ security staff in Greencastle. However, security measures were introduced on the Limavady side.

Therefore, there is a prison, a Ministry of Defence firing range and a beautiful security zone at the slipway. People must drive into high cages, but, if they arrive too early, they cannot drive in. Moreover, if someone drives in, it is impossible to get out again, and cars are searched. Limavady Borough Council wants to save some money. It can save £80,000 by removing that security zone. Such a measure will enhance — at least to some extent — the chances of the ferry remaining viable.

I urge the House and people from the area to visit Magilligan. They will believe what I am saying. It is too precious, and we have little else except tourist attractions. We have no oil, gold, coal or natural resources other than the beauty of the countryside. People might ask why the north-west is not thriving, has not thrived and has been neglected; we have caused it.

We have not recognised what we have, and what we could have. Go to the south-west of Ireland — they have made rocks into a fortune. Places like Killarney do not compare with Magilligan. I am asking that we all wake up —

Mr G Robinson: I remind the Member that the prison has created around 350 jobs. Given the effects of the economic downturn in the Limavady area, particularly with the closure of Seagate, those jobs are very welcome for both sides of the community.

Mr Brolly: I appreciate what the Member has said, but if we are going to have some kind of greater vision, surely we can do better than providing jobs for prison officers in one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland. I think that we can do much better. There could be a championship golf course to link up with golf courses along the north-west and in Donegal. There could be water sports, or a marina — there could be anything. Anything is possible in Magilligan.

7.15 pm

Earlier today a Member was complaining about how Newcastle could not attain a blue flag because of pollution, and how Dundrum Bay was polluted. There is no pollution in Magilligan and, since we are starting from scratch, we can make sure when it is developed that there will be no pollution. Although I appreciate that the prison with 250 jobs is a holding operation, and that some of the local shops may sell an extra 40 cigarettes a week, it is time to open up our eyes and look beyond that. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McClarty: My understanding was that the Adjournment debate was about the Magilligan to Greencastle car ferry service, and apparently not about Magilligan prison, which could be the subject of another debate, because it has huge benefits for the entire East Londonderry constituency and beyond.

Very seldom in the Chamber is there unanimity — sometimes there is grudging unanimity, but on the subject of the Magilligan to Greencastle car ferry I think that there is unqualified unanimity as to the benefits that it provides, not only to the constituency itself, but much further beyond.

As has been pointed out, the service was launched in 2002 with European structural funds, and was designed to promote cross-border travel, tourism and trade. In all those respects, it has been a remarkable success story. The service recorded its one millionth passenger in 2005, and every year since has carried around a quarter of a million passengers. However, the Government of the Republic of Ireland, and ultimately the Northern Ireland Executive, are in danger of neglecting the service, which will result in its closure, wasted investment, and a marked reduction in tourism and trade between Donegal and Northern Ireland.

Of course, people are suffering from the economic downturn on both sides of the border. The ferry represents not only a flow of people, but a flow of money between the two jurisdictions. With the strong euro and cheaper consumer opportunities in Northern Ireland, we are currently at an advantage in attracting tourists and shoppers to Magilligan and the north-east of the Province. Equally, a joint report from Queen's University and University College Dublin in 2006 found that the impact on tourism in Greencastle has resulted in a

marked increase in the number of providers servicing tourism there.

The Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland must come together to save the service. Without the subvention of an estimated €300,000, the service will close in June. The Governments must not look upon saving the service as an added cost. We recognise that this is a time of great fiscal constraint, but saving the Magilligan to Greencastle car ferry service, rather than being an added cost, would be an investment that would result in continued returns in tourism and trade on both sides of the border.

To oversee the closure of the service would be short-sighted and would not represent sustainable management of both our economies in the current economic crisis.

I thank John Dallat for raising this Adjournment topic. I fully support him and all my colleagues who have contributed to the debate.

Mr G Robinson: I declare an interest as a member of Limavady Borough Council.

I am pleased to contribute to this debate, as Limavady Borough Council has supported the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry transport link since 2002-03 with grants totalling more than £800,000. In this financial year, it has supported the ferry with a projected grant of £133,000. The Council's financial backing for the ferry is, therefore, beyond question. Costs include provision for security, staff, energy, rent and rates, insurance and other costs.

My personal commitment to this unique transport link in the north-west is as strong as the council's. I also recognise the difficult economic climate in which everyone, every business and every Assembly Minister has to operate. This difficult economic climate also affects the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry. I must also remind Members that Limavady Borough Council has no spare capacity in its budget, beyond its existing commitments, as expenditure has had to be cut to the bone in order to prevent higher than necessary rises in the rates bills.

Having framed my comments in that context, I wish to explore ways in which to diminish the drain on the public purse, while retaining the ferry service. The development report of 2006 showed that 63% of those who used the ferry did so as part of a leisure outing; 41% of whom used it on day trips. That indicated that the main users of the ferry were using it as a tourist facility. The other notable figures in the report showed that 23% of users were travelling to visit friends and families, or going to and from work in the area. It is therefore essential that we do not overlook the home market for the ferry service.

As that is the case, the council is involved in a project that will, perhaps, highlight the ferry service to a higher level, in tourist literature, local papers and local radio. I also believe that the respective tourist boards could aid awareness of the ferry service by including some higher profiling in their jurisdictions. Such measures would not be intensely expensive and would represent the value-for-money principle that all Members have agreed must be applied to all departmental spending.

This debate is a great way of highlighting the novel means that we in the north-west have of getting around. I believe that the loss of the ferry service would be detrimental, not only the local people, but to the development of our tourist market. The ferry is an essential part of the tourism infrastructure of the north-west and has the potential for growth. I hope that the Minister for Regional Development will consider whether there is anything that his Department can do to help maintain the venture, and that he will have discussions with his counterpart in the Republic in order to determine whether a joint effort can be made to protect this tourism gem.

I wish to make one other point. Mr Brolly mentioned security. Security arrangements are sanctioned by the Department for Transport in London and are enshrined in European legislation. We in Limavady cannot get out of that.

Mr Brolly: We have been examining this issue for six months now, and, in fact, the ferry operator has been told that had a certain officer been present when the chief executive of Limavady Borough Council asked about the need for security at Magilligan, he would have said that there was no need for it. There is no need for security at a slipway. Security is only needed at ports. There is not even a place to tie up a boat at Magilligan; it is just a slipway. There is no need for security, and a decision will probably be made about that soon.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate, and thank the member who secured it and all those who have contributed to it.

I understand the importance of the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service to the people who live in the north-west, and I am very aware that there is real concern that the ferry will be unable to continue its operation. I am conscious of the role that the ferry has played in tourism, and I am aware of the role that the service has played in bringing communities together.

This adjournment debate has been helpful in bringing about a better understanding of the issues involved. As Members said, the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry has been in operation since 2002 as a commercial venture that the Lough Foyle Ferry Company provides

under joint contract with the local councils in Limavady and Donegal.

Funding for its establishment was provided by the Special EU Programmes Body's Peace and Reconciliation Programme, the International Fund for Ireland, Limavady Borough Council and Donegal County Council. My Department has played no direct role in the ferry service.

It may help if I were to start by explaining my Department's role with regard to ferry services and shipping in general. I do not want there to be any misunderstanding about the powers that are available to the Department for Regional Development. As the Minister for that Department, I have responsibility for road ferry services in the North, of which there are two: the Strangford Lough ferry service, which operates between Strangford and Portaferry; and the Rathlin Island ferry, which operates between Rathlin and Ballycastle.

The Strangford Lough ferry service is directly provided by Roads Service, and it is particularly important to the people who live in the upper Ards area, because it gives them better access to schools, hospitals and other services that they would not otherwise have.

Rathlin Island Ferry Limited provides the Rathlin ferry under contract. The service provides a lifeline to the people of Rathlin Island and is essential for the survival of that island community.

The Department's powers with regard to ferry services are contained in the Roads Order 1993. Those powers enable the Department to provide and to support road ferry services. However, in the 1993 Order, "road ferry service" has a particular definition. It is, in effect, a service for conveying vehicles by boat from a road, across the water, to another road. In the context of the Order, the word "road" also has a particular meaning. It is defined as a public road that the Department maintains.

Having considered the legislation, the Department is of the view that the powers to provide support for road ferry services do not extend to the ferry service across Lough Foyle, because it conveys vehicles from one jurisdiction to another.

As the Minister for Regional Development, I have responsibility for ports and harbours, but I do not have responsibility for shipping, which is a reserved matter. Under the Harbours Act 1970, my Department can make grants, or give loans, to harbour authorities. Although those powers are quite wide-ranging, they restrict such support to what are described as "harbour purposes". The powers cannot be used to provide direct support for shipping.

I should point out that where those powers have been used, it has been the policy of the Department not to subsidise harbour authorities. The Department has used those powers within the past few weeks in the north-west. My Department recently provided Derry's Port and Harbour Commissioners with a loan to enable it to invest £2.2 million in a new dredger for use in Lough Foyle. There is no subsidy involved, and the loan is provided at a commercial rate and is fully repayable to the Department.

Setting those issues aside, I also need to be conscious of the financial pressures on the Executive in general and on my Department in particular. The Strangford Lough ferry service has an operating cost of approximately £1.5 million to £1.8 million a year. A new support vessel, which will cost some £4 million, will also be required in the next few years. The Rathlin ferry service will require a subsidy of approximately £600,000 in the coming year.

I have received representations from Members about the conditions of the roads across the North, and I have made it clear on many occasions that my Department's programmes are under-resourced. The needs of the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry must be considered in that context.

The question over the costs involved in meeting the security regime required by the Department of Transport's transport security and contingencies team (TRANSEC) was a matter of dispute among some Members. Maritime security is a reserved matter, and that body is responsible, in effect, for implementing Regulation (EC) No 725/2004, which deals with enhancing ship and port facilities' security.

I understand that the cost involved in meeting TRANSEC's requirements amount to approximately £90,000 a year. Limavady Borough Council currently meets those costs, but it has indicated that it intends to pass them onto the operator. The costs stem from the fact that the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service is a cross-border route, which means that the terminal facility at Magilligan Point is subject to a security requirement of a particular level, which is set by the Department of Transport in London. Obviously, there are further question marks over that, and I am happy to explore the matter.

I have pointed out that my Department has limitations in dealing with the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry, because it does not have a specific statutory responsibility for it. More generally, it is disappointing that no part of Government seems to have a specific role in dealing with that service. However, as I said at the outset, I recognise the importance of the ferry service in the local area.

Despite the limitations of my Department, there is — at the very least — a need for interested parties to more fully explore whether any options are available that

may help the service. I would be happy to be involved in that process with my Department.

7.30 pm

I have already received approaches from Members asking me to meet constituents, and I have agreed to those requests. Building on the information that has been gained in this debate, I want to explore the issues more fully at those meetings and evaluate whether assistance may be possible.

It has been suggested that this issue should be added to the agenda of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). As has been mentioned, I understand that it was one of the points that was discussed during a recent Adjournment debate in the Dáil. The Official Report shows that Noel Ahern, the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, answered the debate. He pointed out that shipping services do not fall within the remit of the North/South body, and that it had not addressed that sort of issue previously.

However, as I have already stated, I am willing to help facilitate — in whatever way possible — the examination of all options that might reduce the risk to the operation of that important cross-border transport link. I am willing to engage with the NIO and the British Department for Transport about any reserved matters of security and shipping, and with Limavady Borough Council and Donegal County Council about finding solutions to this matter. Although shipping does not fall within the remit of the NSMC meeting in transport sectoral format, I will meet Minister Dempsey in the NSMC in the near future. I will take that opportunity to raise the issue with him.

I also feel that the ferry service promotes tourism. I think that most of the people who spoke agreed that it was very important for tourism in the northern region of the island. It also promotes business, and it moves workers, goods and people. Therefore, I will also consult with my Executive colleague in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Minister Foster.

Even with the legislative limitations that apply to my Department in relation to this issue, it is incumbent on us all to try to explore — with all of the interested parties — what avenues may be open to us to ensure that that ferry service continues to operate. It is important that the service continues to be a feature of life in the north-west. I certainly hope that we will play our part in doing that by engaging with others who have a responsibility or role in that matter. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Adjourned at 7.32 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 23 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr P J Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was told that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development would be making a statement in the House on the farm-modernisation programme. Has the Minister been in touch with your office about making such a statement?

Mr Speaker: It is up to individual Ministers whether they wish to make a statement in the House on any matter. I have not had a request from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week, while making a point of order, Rev Willie McCrea spent a couple of minutes questioning whether a Minister should resign. Given that the Speaker has made a ruling that such matters are clearly not points of order, was it right for the Member to have been allowed to waste that time? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: On more than one occasion in the House, I have brought the abuse of points of order to Members' attention. Points of order must be relevant to the business that is being discussed in the House. I have not checked the Hansard report for the incident that the Member mentioned, but I am happy to do so. Occasionally, Members on all sides of the House abuse points of order. Nevertheless, in that instance, it would have been better had the Member raised his point of order after the debate. Points of order should not be abused in any shape, form or fashion. Points of order should relate to the business that is taking place in the House at that time.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Provisions Bill

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to introduce the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 6/08], which is a Bill to confer absolute privilege on certain reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland; to enable the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to incur expenditure for certain purposes; to provide for the costs of district rates collection to be charged on and issued out of the Consolidated Fund to the Department of Finance and Personnel; and to repeal the requirement on the Department of Finance and Personnel to prepare finance accounts.

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.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Closure of Residential Care Homes

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

Mr Poots: I beg to move

That the Assembly expresses its opposition to the proposed closure of residential care homes by a number of Health and Social Care Trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to intervene and listen to the concerns of the community and take appropriate action to minimise the pain, stress and anxiety that this uncertainty has created among elderly care home residents, their families and health workers.

I have no pleasure in moving the motion, because we should not be in this situation. During the debate, I suspect that some Members — including the Minister in his response — will state that the Minister's hands are tied and that due to the requirement on him to make efficiency savings, he has no option but to consider closing residential care homes. Let me put that notion to bed; it is inaccurate.

The spend per head in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is 10% higher than it is in England, and there are 23% more jobs in the Health Service here than there are in England. Furthermore, there has been an 11.9% increase in the health budget from 2007-08 to 2010-11. Therefore, the health budget has increased by 11.9% over three years; it has not been cut. Some 51% of additional allocations throughout the Northern Ireland Departments went to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as against the existing budget of 48%.

By 2010-11, spending in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will rise to £4.3 billion. That is more than double the amount spent on health in 2000-01. Let us be honest with the people: there are efficiency savings to be made. That should not be seen as an opportunity to make cuts in the Health Service; it has more money now than it had — not less.

We are aware that staff productivity is 11% less. In the past five years, staff numbers in the Health Service have risen by 21.4%, but hospital activity has increased by only 6.3%. Although I sympathise with the Minister in that regard, he has a challenging job to do. People who have been engaged in administration for a long time intend to hold onto their jobs, by hook or by crook.

They will provide the Minister with 101 reasons why their jobs are so important, when, in fact, those jobs are of minimal importance to the Health Service when compared with the issue that is being debated today.

If you do not want to take my word for it, why not take the word of Professor John Appleby, who was brought in to look at the Health Service. He identified that the unit cost of hospital procedures in Northern Ireland is 9% higher than those in England; hospital throughput is 26% less; consultant productivity is 7.4% less; public-health habits relating to diet, alcohol and exercise are worse; GP lists are 10% shorter; spend per head on prescriptions is 29% greater; and the ratio of our nurses, vis-à-vis qualified/unqualified, is greater.

Let us be honest and identify that the cuts — or the efficiency savings — need to be made in administration, not in the front line services.

Having posed nine questions on that issue to the Minister of Health, I am disgusted that I have not received answers to the vast majority of those. Those simple questions asked, for example, how many statutory homes in the 15-mile radius surrounding Dromore are closing or have closed, and how many bed places have been lost in the past five years. Answering those questions should not be very hard to do, but Mr McGimpsey says that the information is not available in the format requested and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost. That is rubbish, yet the same response has been given to a number of questions that have been asked of the Minister.

I am deeply disappointed that the Minister refuses to answer the questions. The same situation applies when the people on the Skeagh House committee ask questions of the local health trust — they cannot get answers either. Clearly, the health trusts and the Department of Health are clamming up and are not prepared to talk to people.

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

Skeagh House is a care home in my constituency. We are deeply concerned about the closure of that home, as the service that is provided there is second to none. However, I am only a politician; people do not believe politicians. Perhaps they will believe the professionals in the health field, the doctors in Dromore, who say:

“we have visited the home, often on a weekly basis, almost since it opened and were delighted to celebrate the 25th anniversary recently. During those years we have been in a position to observe the quality of the service provided by the staff at the home to the residents. We have consistently observed what a high quality service is provided at all times. It is interesting to observe that many of the Southern Board officers leading the closure campaign have only been in post for less than two years.

All the doctors and practice staff, as well as the district nurses hold the Staff and personnel working in Skeagh House in the highest esteem. The facilities offered by the home are modern, safe

and effective. There is a 'home away from home' atmosphere and all staff hold the residents, who are frequently in later life or have other physical or mental challenges, in the highest respect. ...

We are being consistently told by relatives of the inconvenience that would result from having to travel to neighbouring towns by public transport, to visit their family who might be residents elsewhere. Residents benefit from remaining in their own locality and being in contact with old friends and neighbours."

That is what the doctors — the health professionals — say.

Never mind what I, or the doctors, say: let us hear what the residents have to say, because they are the most important people. I will read an extract from a letter that I received from a lady, who, for the sake of anonymity, I will call Annie. Annie says:

"I had the privilege of working in Skeagh House for 12 happy years, but had to leave because I had a major heart attack in October 2004 and a defibrillator implanted. During this time, I was caring for my 90-year-old mother ... a frail lady who has muscular degeneration. Being blind in one eye and partially sighted in the other, she also walks with aid of a rolator. She is now 94 years old and when I took ill so suddenly, she was admitted to Skeagh House as an emergency admission, as there was no one to care for her. I still care for my mother 24/7 and she would go to Skeagh House every 6 weeks for respite for 2 weeks, which is greatly needed on advice from my consultant, in the Belfast City Hospital."

That is one case.

I will read a letter that describes the case of another lady, whom I will call Mary, who:

"lived alone in Portadown after her husband died and she retired from her job in the library when she was 60. She was registered blind on 16 October 1992 and received the services of a home help as it was unsafe for her to cook. When pouring a cup of tea, she placed the cup in the sink as a safety measure. Then she received a liquid leveller which made a noise when the correct amount was in the cup.

It was obvious that as her sight loss was a big handicap, residential care was necessary and almost nine years ago she came to Skeagh House after her family had considered a number of options. Skeagh House appealed to them because of the layout and the friendly staff. She now looks on Skeagh House as her home and is happy and feels secure there. She would have great difficulty in adapting to new surroundings because of her poor eyesight.

The news came as a great shock and has left her broken-hearted and her family very unhappy. Due to uncertainty, it spoiled Christmas for them all."

12.15 pm

I give Members another example:

"My mum ... has worked, lived in the Dromore area all her life, drove her own car and lived alone since my father died. Following his death, my mum's home was broken into and items stolen — still she didn't give up and soldiered on independently. Later she was diagnosed with osteoporosis and also suffered a stroke. She was hospitalised at this time for nine months in Lagan Valley Hospital, Lisburn. She was then advised that it would be unsafe for her to return to her own home and independent living; residential care had to be her future.

After my sister and I had taken mum to see several residential homes, her choice was Skeagh House. We were united in our opinion as to the warm and comfortable surroundings and very

friendly staff. This has been mum's home since August 2000 and she feels happy and secure there.

My mum will be 89 years of age in April and could I ask how at this age she can go looking for a new home? Some of the other residents are much older and some have failing eyesight."

That is the situation in case after case in that Southern Trust home, where 102 people are in statutory residential care. Minister, those are 102 human beings, not 102 units, 102 vehicles in a fleet or 102 pallets in a warehouse. Those are 102 human beings — people who served our community for years, in grim times. Many of them lived through the Second World War, and they all came through the worst excesses of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. They have worked to create a better environment for us. What are we going to do for them? Are we going to turf them out of the home that they have come to love over the years, or are we going to support them?

The Minister must find efficiency savings where he can. I have identified that he has additional money and that he can make those efficiency savings elsewhere. I have a volume of signed petitions, and there are more to come. The public are deeply angered by the proposal —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Poots: I am thankful for the opportunity to bring this serious matter before the House today.

Mrs O'Neill: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

"; and further calls on the Minister to ensure that any proposals coming from Trusts are equality proofed so that services are available for those most in need."

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Members' opposite for tabling the motion. I hope that they can accept Sinn Féin's amendment, because it enhances the motion's sentiments.

Members will be aware that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety brought a motion to the House last week that called for the protection of the most vulnerable in society. Many Members contributed to that debate and expressed concern around a number of issues, which included front line job cuts and home-help services. Few Members failed to mention the closure of residential homes, yet those closures affect all trust areas.

As we all know, efficiency savings are a controversial issue. We are all aware that the purpose of those savings is to cut out waste and to deliver the same service in a more efficient and effective way. However, those health-sector savings appear to have impacted on the most vulnerable in society. Staff, patients, residents and their families have all been experiencing anxiety and concern over recent months. We must do all that we can to protect the most vulnerable in society.

The trusts' decisions to close residential homes have caused widespread concerns in the wider community. The Western Trust told the Health Committee that it had received more than 4,000 signatures opposing the closure of one nursing home. That demonstrates that it is not just the residents of the nursing home who are affected but wider society.

I fully support care in the community, and people should be supported to live independently in their own homes. However, we must also be realistic, because services are not in place to allow people to do that. People are aware of the situation concerning home helps. Some people are allocated 15 minutes of support, which is insufficient and inadequate to help people to live independently. If we are serious about moving towards people living independently, we will have to address that issue. Services are already stretched and unable to deal with people, and if many more people are to be discharged from residential homes, I do not know how those people will manage.

In Mid Ulster, many families depend on the services that Cherry Lodge offers. It is a respite facility for disabled children, and it is a lifeline for the families who use it. Often, those children have complex needs. They must go into respite care for their security and for their family to have a rest. A campaign has been mounted in Mid Ulster to retain Cherry Lodge, and I support the calls from the families to keep the facility open. My colleague Francie Molloy and I recently visited the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's headquarters, where we spoke to its chief executive and chairperson to put the case for that residential home and other challenging issues in its proposals.

At that meeting, the chief executive gave a commitment that no change will take place until people and their families are content and satisfied that any new system or service will continue in the future. We will continue to monitor that emerging situation very closely.

As Mr Poots said, a number of people took time out of their schedule this morning to come to the Assembly to present Members with a list of names in a petition. It is clear from the pile of papers that Mr Poots showed us this morning that there is genuine concern in the community about the proposed closure of the homes. Our amendment calls on the Minister to ensure that any proposals to emerge from the trust are equality proofed so that services will be available for those most in need. We have a moral obligation to protect the most vulnerable in our society. We must ensure that there is equality of outcome for all in relation to access to services, but, in particular, for the elderly, the disabled and the young.

I am aware that the proposals were equality proofed when they were initially published, but if real

consultation takes place and the trusts take on board what the communities are telling them, any changes and decisions will have to be equality proofed.

We can all accept that the pocket money that the British Treasury has allowed us is inadequate, to say the least. Even if we had a massive pot of money for health, I do not believe that it would ever be enough. There will always be demands on the Health Service, but we must accept reality; we have to live with the resources that are available, and we must target them at those who are most in need. Efficiencies need to be achieved where they can, but they should not be focused on the services for the most vulnerable in society. I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McCallister: This subject is very important and emotive, and there is a recognition that it has certainly caused concern and alarm in communities throughout Northern Ireland. I am quite sure that the issue has been brought to the attention of each and every MLA in their constituency work.

Care homes provide a valuable service in looking after our elderly people who have contributed so much to society throughout their lives. Many people who live in care homes are extremely vulnerable. For those people, care homes become their homes, and their fellow residents and carers become an extension of their families.

Care homes are also of great benefit to families who do not have the ability, or facilities, to care for their loved one. Local care homes allow people to live close to their families, friends and communities. Of course, health trusts span various constituencies, and some cater for people in my constituency and in neighbouring constituencies. Mr Poots mentioned Skeagh House care home in Dromore, and I must also mention the Grove House in Ballynahinch and Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that the matter is widespread across Northern Ireland? In my constituency of East Antrim, there is the Lisgarel residential care home in Larne, Greenisland House in the Carrickfergus area, and Clonmore House residential care home in the Newtownabbey area, which is also a concern for my colleague for North Belfast Mr Cobain. All those homes are central to service provision in the East Antrim area, which has already suffered years and years of diminution of its health services generally. Does the Member agree that the centrality of those homes — right at the heart of the communities — adds to the value of the excellent work that is taking place there?

Mr McCallister: I thank my colleague for that intervention. When I think of homes such as Slieve Roe House in the isolated Mourne area, I realise that it is essential that, as we move forward, we strike the

right balance. We must keep people near their communities and value the health benefits that derive from that.

However, we must face reality; this situation is not of the Health Minister's making. The fact is that the health budget is clearly inadequate. There is a funding gap of £600 million between provision in Northern Ireland and England. That is the figure with which the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) agrees. I am not sure what figure Mr Poots referred to earlier, but the figure that I have just quoted is from the Department of his colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I must point out that no decisions have been taken on the future of those care homes and that the consultation is still very much ongoing.

Mr McNarry: Does the Member agree that where a residential home, such as Ard Cuan in my Strangford constituency, is under pressure from the trusts — I must emphasise the trusts' consultation on proposed closures — the legal definition of the word "residential" must be determined. The families and residents whom he talks about in his area, just like the families and residents in my area, believe that living in a residential home involves a contract of tenure. Therefore, we need to assess the legality of the word "residential" and what it means to those people.

Mr McCallister: Absolutely. My honourable friend raised several points, not all of which related to the definition. Everyone wants their loved ones to live independently, or to live with them, for as long as possible, but there will always be a need for residential care provision, and appropriate levels of care must be put in place. During Committee evidence sessions, officials from some trusts said that they did not have sufficient care packages in place, which was worrying, and it raises the question of how they will cope.

The implications for the Budget were that the 3% efficiency savings were rock solid. That was imposed, and supported, by the DUP. Now, suddenly, the DUP seems to want to distance itself from that.

Some Members: Tut-tut.

Mr McCallister: Some Members can tut-tut all they want, but the DUP nailed its colours to the mast regarding the 3% efficiencies.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I am running short on time, and I have already given way twice.

Consultations are being carried out with trusts, care homes and communities. That is a necessary step, but no decisions have yet been taken. Although recognising the potential ordeal involved in moving elderly people from their established homes, this is also part of the long-term strategy of implementing the relevant aspects of the Appleby Report, which Mr Poots referred to,

and facilitating and supporting more elderly people to live in their own homes in the community.

The current strategic direction is to maintain people living independently in the community for as long as possible. I do not think that anyone will object to that, providing the appropriate support is in place, but we need residential homes as back-up care facilities.

The DUP is constantly championing the Appleby Report, and no one has promoted Appleby's findings on the public-health agenda more than the current Minister.

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

Mr McCallister: The motion is worthy of support, but people must champion more money for the health budget.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who proposed it. However, I wish that they had talked to their leader and the Finance Minister and thought through the detail and impact of the 3% cuts. The proposal by a number of health and social care trusts to close statutory residential homes is ill-advised and is being driven primarily by the unending pressure on them to cut costs and make savings at the sharp, or delivery, end. The constant pressure for cost saving, when engaging with our elderly population, is counterproductive, and, in the long run, may increase the burden on the taxpayer unnecessarily.

Over the past few decades, the trend has been to close statutory care nursing and residential homes for the elderly, and for the elderly and mentally infirm. The motive for the great majority of closures has been financial. They are being closed by stealth. Some homes are in a state of disrepair and need to be modernised, but that is also the case for other healthcare facilities. Although there are some not-for-profit homes run by religious institutions, charities and the like, we are now dependent on the private-for-profit sector to look after about 85%, or 17 out of 20, of our elderly population.

I am not hostile to private-for-profit providers of residential care. I acknowledge that most homes are well run and have twice-yearly inspections by quality impact assessors who look at staff, accommodation, building fabric, etc. However, the fact must be faced that the primary objective of those homes is to make a profit and a return on capital on the often very significant investment that private residential homeowners have to make. That means that they must ensure that income exceeds cost, and there may be an inevitable temptation to do the minimum necessary to pass the inspections.

The owners of some residential homes are already under financial pressure, but what other area of healthcare for the very vulnerable is expected to make a profit?

12.30 pm

It is more feasible for statutory homes to set standards of excellence and innovation. Because the private sector must make a profit each year, it will inevitably be driven to be more selective in the type of elderly resident it accepts. It will be more reluctant to accept people with more complex needs, because such elderly people need more care in certain matters.

Often, an elderly person with a particular need may otherwise be very independent and mentally alert and need no nursing care. Such care would detract from that person's independence and autonomy, because he or she would mix with other, frailer and more dependent people. It would also cost the taxpayer £100 per week more if that person were to go into a nursing home because there was no residential care home.

If we close down the statutory residential homes, we will leave a gap in the spectrum of care between, at the lower end, the fold-type of residence with a warden, which provides care in the community for the able-bodied and independent, and, at the upper end, nursing care. Residential homes are also used for patients who may be — to use an awful phrase — bed blocking, or whose discharge has been delayed. They may need rehabilitation, physiotherapy or occupational therapy before they can be sent home.

We are told that the best option for elderly people is that they stay in their own homes for as long as possible — care in the community — and I agree with that. However, domiciliary care, on a one-to-one basis, can be very difficult to deliver. I did it for 10 years and, believe me, it can be complex and difficult. However, if there are residential homes, people can be kept more active; they can enjoy craft, music and dance, rather than move into a nursing home before they require it.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that, when a trust asks an elderly person whether he or she would prefer to live in his or her own home or in a residential care home, the question is loaded? It will almost always elicit a response in favour of living in one's own home. For many people, who are not ready for a nursing home but who cannot stay at home, residential care is the only real and practical choice. If we go down the route of doing away with statutory residential care, we could end up with a situation similar to that in England, where care in residential private nursing homes is of a much lower standard than we would expect for our elderly people.

Mrs Hanna: Yes. That is exactly what I have said. Only the statutory sector will maintain standards of excellence. Some elderly people do not have a choice: they do not need nursing care, but they cannot stay at home. We need a level of residential care.

However, the current proposal is more about efficiency savings than about choice and quality of

care. I cannot stress that strongly enough. It is hasty, and a bad move. Of course, we should keep people at home if at all possible, but there will always be those who need residential care. Some people are now planning for the future, which is not as secure as it was 10 or 20 years ago, and they are already looking at residential homes. Those people are still mentally alert and fit, but they know that, a few years down the road, they will need that sort of care.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that not only is that the case, but that respite provision for those who have to care for elderly people living at home is at least as important an issue and ought to be taken into consideration?

Mrs Hanna: The Member has just stolen my next point and made it well.

This decision has to be about choice and quality. Removing the level of statutory residential care will be financially counterproductive.

Mr McCarthy: I am glad that the Minister is present. Unfortunately, his response to some of our questions may be limited because consultation is ongoing.

The proposed closure of a number of statutory residential care homes in order to save money, as Members have said, has caused much anxiety among residents and their relatives. Consultation with the public has been ongoing for some time. As we have heard, there is great opposition to these, and any, closures. Let us not forget that we are dealing with elderly human beings who deserve to be treated with respect, to have their needs met and to be as comfortable and content as is humanly possible.

Many of the residents of nursing homes have lived there for some time. They consider their present provision to be a long-term requirement and do not wish to move to some unknown location.

They have made friends in their existing home, and have experienced a first-class service from the staff in that home. The last thing that they need is uncertainty, a change of environment, or a change in the people who look after their needs.

I attended a public meeting with officials from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and relatives of residents of the now-threatened Loch Cuan House residential home in Newtownards. At that meeting, total opposition to the home's closure was expressed by the relatives and the public representatives. We hope that the trust's officials got the message of that evening loud and clear, and will acknowledge the wishes of the residents and their relatives. It would appear that, because of a gradual running down of Loch Cuan House over a period of time — and I presume that that is happening all over — there are now, I understand, some seven residents, and no more

admissions of new residents seem to be planned for Loch Cuan House.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member is describing closure by stealth, because I am sure that those places could adequately be used by other people who have respite care needs.

Mr McCarthy: That would appear to be what is happening; and, certainly, it is what has been happening at Loch Cuan House for some time, which is unfortunate for the people who require its services. The least that the trust can do is to allow those seven residents of Loch Cuan House the choice to finish their days in a place that they call home. Certainly, before any change can be made, the residents' individual needs should be assessed. I am sure that that situation is replicated across other boards in Northern Ireland. Loch Cuan House was also used as a respite facility and was greatly valued and appreciated by all who needed that service.

Mr Shannon: The Member has outlined the case for Loch Cuan House, and, very clearly, a risk assessment should be carried out before anything happens with regard to the home's future. Does the Member agree that the age group of those residents — between the ages of 88 and 98 — indicates that a risk assessment should be the first priority before anything is done in relation to the future of the home?

Mr McCarthy: I agree entirely with what the Member said; he was at the same meeting that I attended, at which, as he will remember, a commitment was given that there will be an assessment. We hope that that will be carried out before there is any change, and that those seven people get their day in Loch Cuan House.

Supported housing was due to replace Loch Cuan House on the same or a nearby site. That was an option that could have allayed residents' fears. Now, even that has been kicked into touch, and, for one reason or another, is not going to happen. The Executive have made much comment on how they regard our senior citizens, to even the point of almost providing a commissioner for older people; that has not been done, but I understand that it is in the offing. What way is it to treat our older dependent citizens by throwing them out of statutory residential homes with a very uncertain future? Surely, they deserve better.

Of course, everyone supports efficiencies, and if there are more efficient ways of providing care for our elderly people, which — and this is the important aspect — have the consent of those same elderly people, it would make sense to provide care in that way. However, the Health Service has a statutory duty to make that provision; it must not all be left to the private sector. Care in the community has its advantages, particularly as it allows elderly people to stay in their own homes for as long as they wish. Unfortunately, we

are all too aware that community-care packages are not always readily available.

There must be no closures of any kind of those homes while there is a demand. With an ever increasing elderly population, I have no doubt that that demand will continue to exist.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCarthy: The need for respite care for newly discharged hospital patients is another issue that has to be considered. I support the motion and the proposed amendment.

Mr Ross: I do not have any difficulties with the amendment, but I am not sure that it is entirely necessary, given the legal measures that have to take place anyway. Over the past six months, few issues have generated as much public concern as the proposed closure of residential care homes. As Ken Robinson said, three homes are earmarked for closure in my constituency of East Antrim: Lisgarel, Greenisland Residential Home and Clonmore House in Newtownabbey.

I have received hundreds of emails, letters and phone calls about the proposals, and, although there is public anger at all the proposed closures, the case of Lisgarel has provoked more anger than the others, especially given the fact Larne already suffers from a lack of healthcare provision when compared with elsewhere in Northern Ireland. The level of public outrage is not only gauged by the volume of correspondence that local representatives have received but by the fact that some 500 people turned up to the Clarion Hotel and, similarly, hundreds of people packed out public meetings that were held by local clergy in Larne.

I have met residents, their families and carers, all of whom are scared, angered and upset that the trust appears to want to close the residential homes in East Antrim. Indeed, this morning, on the steps at the front of this Building, I was handed a petition that has been signed by thousands of people from my constituency, all of whom are outraged by the proposals to close care homes. Accompanied by my colleagues Alex Easton and Jonathan Craig —

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member agree that, particularly in the East Antrim constituency of which he, I and other Members know, the issue has raised public concern to an extraordinary level? That was witnessed in the meetings in Larne and in the meeting in the Clarion Hotel in Carrickfergus that the Member and I both attended. I have visited the three homes and spoken to staff, relatives and residents. The issue goes right to the core of care — not only care in the home but the feeling of care that the whole community has towards those residents.

Mr Ross: I agree wholeheartedly. On previous issues to do with healthcare, all the MLAs who represent East Antrim have worked together. I look forward to that happening again and all of us putting pressure on the Minister to ensure that the closures do not happen. I will deliver the petitions to the Minister's office later this afternoon.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way again, because I will have only one extra minute to speak, and I have a lot to get through.

Healthcare provision is not a new argument for East Antrim. Previously, I led an Adjournment debate in the House on the matter, and I highlighted the fact that the over 65s population in Larne is 10% greater than elsewhere and that the town is underprovided for in comparison with other trust areas. Every week, the Minister refers to efficiency savings, and he pledged that those would not affect front line services. Over the past number of weeks, the Assembly has debated motions about the cuts in the Health Service that are proposed by the Minister. The Health budget is, in fact, the biggest ever budget for health in Northern Ireland, and it received over 50% of additional funding in the —

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way, because I have already said that I do not want to give away any more time. I am sure that the Member's colleague will comment on that.

The re-provision of the trust residential homes document and the closure of the five statutory residential homes, including Lisgarel, will have a massive impact on the elderly population, particularly in Larne. Closing residential homes and effectively telling residents to go elsewhere is hugely traumatic for them and their families and leads to distress, which, as we know, leads to premature death. Research in GB has shown that, in areas where care homes have been closed, the life expectancy of the residents decreases.

I have been contacted by one constituent whose mother is a resident of Clonmore House, and she is at pains to say that her mother sees Clonmore not as an institution but as her home. She sees her carers and her fellow residents as friends, and she is very happy there.

Over recent weeks, I have been slightly encouraged by the change of tact by the trust, which now says that the original document was badly worded.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I have already said that I will not give way to the Ulster Unionist Party, so I will be consistent and not give way.

The trust has made many statements in the local papers saying that it wants to replace Lisgarel rather than closing it. That is welcome, but it is of limited value to

people who have parents or loved ones in other homes in the area. Other Members have said that elderly people do not want to live in residential homes, but living at home without 24-hour assistance is not always appropriate or available. There comes a time in most people's lives when independent living is just not suitable.

People are vulnerable, frail and have been neglected or are unable to cope with living on their own, and that high level of dependency requires 24-hour help, not just the 15 or 20 minutes that community care often leads to. Some weeks ago, the Minister said that he did not recognise the claim that 15 or 20 minutes a day of care takes place, but I assure him that many families in my constituency certainly recognise that.

12.45 pm

Today, many people from Larne have made the trip to Stormont and are present in the Public Gallery. I want to mention Lisgarel residential care home specifically, because it is a fantastic facility. It is situated in a complex that is tucked in off the road in the centre of Larne. The complex contains a day centre and a number of chalets for sheltered accommodation. It is close to a local health centre and Inver House. Lisgarel was underrated by the criteria that are used to judge various care homes because due regard was not given to its existing sheltered accommodation, health centre or day centre.

The consultation document also states that Lisgarel is situated on the outskirts of Larne. In fact, it is situated within one third of a mile from Larne's town centre. People who live there, and, indeed, those who live in other residential care homes, not only have 24-hour care but companionship, mental stimulation, support, and they live in a protected environment.

Discussion on cutting services at Inver House took place on the basis that Lisgarel would be retained and enhanced. The Department must live up to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Ross: Finally, although Members understand that, because consultation is ongoing, the Minister cannot comment on the matter in any detail during the debate, I appeal to him to listen to the debate and to ensure that he does not take any decisions that will put the lives of care home residents in East Antrim and elsewhere in Northern Ireland at risk.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In any debate about the elderly population, the valuable contribution that older people have made, and continue to make, to society must be recognised. There must also be recognition that negative attitudes to ageing have prevented the development of policies and structures to deal with poverty, ill health and the isolation of older people. The Assembly must pledge to

support and pursue actively the political and legislative changes that are necessary to establish a decent standard of living, full access to services and the right of senior citizens to participate fully in the community, regardless of whether they live in residential care homes or not. It is vital that mechanisms are developed to value and recognise properly the lifelong contributions of older citizens.

Unfortunately, older people are often seen as a commodity. The number of private residential care homes has increased dramatically during the past number of years. Those residential care homes are commercial enterprises and are in business to make money and profit. In contrast, the number of residential care homes that are run by trusts has diminished. Recent proposals to close more of that type of accommodation do not bode well for the future provision of those homes.

Many of the issues that must be addressed in order to promote social inclusion relate to the provision of quality services and access to those services. Just because older people live in residential care does not mean that they should be forgotten about and not included in society. Unfortunately, many people who live in residential care homes become institutionalised quickly. That must be factored into any decision on closure of residential care homes.

There should always be an adequate level of nursing care in residential accommodation. As care recipients, older people need support for independent living, particularly in their own homes. It is important to maintain independence. However, that requires a sufficient provision of support services. My mother, who, fortunately, lives independently at home — and who will be 100 years of age on 3 March 2009 — receives what could be considered minimum care support from the trust. Much more work is needed in order to put effective planning and support resources in place to enable health and social care services to respond to older people's needs.

Elder abuse is another issue that must be addressed. A recent study shows that 3% of older people in the North suffer elder abuse in their own homes. Only 4% of older people here live in residential care homes; yet 23% of calls to elder abuse helplines are from residents of such homes. That problem certainly must be addressed and awareness of it raised among the public.

Provision of supported and sheltered accommodation for older people must not be isolated but situated in the wider community, which will enable senior citizens to participate fully in the community. It is incumbent on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take all those factors into account when he considers the closure of any residential care home. Full and proper consultation is essential in order to take into account

the feelings of elderly care home residents, their families and the healthcare professionals who are involved.

Finally, I call on the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to consider carefully its proposals to close Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel and Mullinure Hospital in Armagh. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: I apologise for not being present earlier in the debate: I was speaking at an event in the Long Gallery.

In expressing opposition to the closure of residential homes, I will make a number of general points that apply across the range of residential care homes. I will also focus specifically on Ravara House in my constituency of North Down. Indeed, this debate is especially relevant to North Down, given that the size of the elderly population there has increased at a higher rate than in any other constituency in Northern Ireland; that increase will be about 13·4% by 2011.

The Minister refers to the costs of residential homes, but does he realise that the proposed closure of homes will carry significant costs, and not only financial ones? He was kind enough to come to my constituency and listen to the anxieties of friends and family whose loved ones reside in the excellent Ravara House. He must not allow himself to fall into the trap of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.

I want to address the issue of our elderly living in safe, secure environments that enhance their quality of life. We want residential environments to provide added value for residents. Families who have a loved one living in a residential unit need reassurance that their loved one is comfortable and happy and that the physical environment and quality of care that he or she receives is satisfactory. Those general principles apply to all residential homes that are under consultation for closure. Those principles are very well followed at Ravara House, so I tell the Minister — if something is not broken, do not fix it.

I learned a great deal from speaking to residents of Ravara House and, indeed, to their friends and families. I learned that Kilcooley — an area identified under the targeting social-need criteria — has a facility that has demonstrated caring excellence as a matter of course. Ravara House is a place where residents feel genuinely safe, secure and comfortable. I saw its staff and volunteers demonstrate practically the level of care and vocational commitment needed in order to provide a high quality residential environment that clearly meets the needs of vulnerable elderly people.

I wish that I could end my contribution there, but, sadly, I cannot. This debate has been made necessary by the proposed closure of Ravara House and other homes across Northern Ireland. Residents of Ravara told me of their pain at the proposed closure of the facility in which so much of their lives is invested.

That pain was not only expressed in their words — it was etched on their faces. Those residents regard Ravara House as simply irreplaceable.

The Minister must appreciate the benefits that such homes bring for residents, their families, local employment and, thereby, the local economy. He must also realise that that value goes beyond the accountant's bottom line on financial accounts. This debate is being watched keenly from the Public Gallery by vulnerable elderly people and their families. It creates an opportunity for consideration of, and deliberation on, the closure plans. I fear that if the Minister acts in haste — and homes are closed — he will repent at leisure. Sadly, that will be too late for vulnerable elderly people.

Our residential homes are of greater value than any words of mine can afford them. I ask the Minister to give due regard to the needs of our valuable and vulnerable people and reverse the closures that have been proposed by the trusts.

Mr Gardiner: Caring for the elderly is an important aspect of the Department of Health's work. The number of elderly people, as a proportion of our society, is increasing and, therefore, the nature and extent of the healthcare and residential care afforded to them is a major issue for the Assembly. The number of people who are of pensionable age is projected to increase by around 9% in the next five years and by around 40% over the next 15 years. This is clearly an important strategic issue as people live to a greater age.

It is important that we remember the human aspects of this issue rather than being driven simply by statistics. However, we must consider the significant budgetary constraints that have been placed on the Health Minister by a DUP Minister of Finance.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gardiner: Despite continually pointing out that the Health Service needs more investment, the DUP insisted on a draft Budget that would have seen a reduction in health spending.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Member agree that we need a long-term policy for care services for older people? Moreover, does he agree that we should ask the Finance Minister to find money for that and find the money that the boards are trying to find in respect of efficiency savings, so that older people do not have to be evicted from their homes?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the honourable Member for her intervention, and I have no problem with her suggestion.

Thankfully, the Health Minister saw through the smokescreen, and, with the public's help, the draft Budget was defeated.

Nonetheless, the DUP proposed the efficiency savings process, supported it at Executive meetings and voted it through the House. Indeed, Mr Poots, who proposed today's motion, sat at the Executive table and agreed to the efficiency savings process. Therefore, the DUP's cynical attempt to blame others smacks of hypocrisy.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gardiner: Health spends such vast amounts —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, I will not give way.

Health spends such vast amounts of money because of need. Northern Ireland's need has, time and again, been greater than that in other parts of the United Kingdom. The DUP is exercising power without responsibility, and its behaviour has the hallmark of extreme cynicism, which is the mark of the DUP and Sinn Féin's cosy relations. The DUP lights the touchpaper and then criticises others for the consequences of its financial actions.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that there are major flaws, including financial flaws, in the trusts' consultation process? Initially, they spoke of closing homes including Lisgarel, Greenisland House and Clonmore House, which would affect my constituents. However, they spoke latterly of replacement. In addition, a major plank of the trusts' proposals is for supported housing. However, no social housing association has committed to providing that funding.

Mr Gardiner: I thank my honourable friend for his intervention, and I agree that there are major flaws.

I have recently been involved in the plight of the residents of Skeagh House in Dromore, County Down. I was accompanied on a visit by my honourable friend George Savage. Although the home is not physically in my constituency of Upper Bann, many of the residents that will be affected by its proposed closure — and I emphasise the word "proposed" — are from Upper Bann. Therefore, it is a major concern to George Savage and me.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that Skeagh House is one of the best, most professionally run and homely of all homes? Does he agree that Members should ask the DUP and others to support the Health Minister by providing the finance that is required to keep worthwhile facilities throughout Northern Ireland together, rather than party political posturing?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gardiner: Hear, hear.

I pay tribute to the management and staff of Skeagh House for the upkeep of that home, which was built only 30 years ago. During my visit, I met a lady who is blind. If she is moved from that accommodation into a two-bedroom flat or a bedsit, she will get no exercise,

compared with the standard of care that she receives in Skeagh House. Moreover, the equipment at Skeagh House is second to none.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister has yet to make a decision on this matter and related matters, and I encourage him to look favourably on elderly people. Government must try, wherever possible under the regime of DUP financial cuts, to protect the weak from the strong.

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

Mr Gallagher: Like other Members, and elected representatives elsewhere, I have been at a number of public meetings in my constituency to hear the public anger and outcry over the trusts' plans to close residential homes, and to go further and cut day-centre provision. We know that that initiative follows on from the Budget that was passed by the Assembly some time ago.

I noted the phrase used by Alex Easton, a member of the Health Committee, when he said that the Minister knew the price of everything and the value of nothing. It seems to me that that label is more fitting for both the DUP and Sinn Féin; Members from those parties went through the Lobbies that day and voted in favour of the Budget.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I am not giving way.

Some of us in the House on that day said that they had got it wrong, and that it was a market-forces Budget, which prioritised economic efficiency and paid no attention to the needs of the elderly, the weak and the vulnerable in society. Today we see the consequences of that.

I support the motion and the amendment, even though, bearing in mind the Budget, I find it difficult to understand how the motion was tabled by the DUP and the amendment by Sinn Féin.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I am not giving way.

I want to speak about my constituency, as other Members have highlighted pressing matters in theirs. In the Western Trust area, there are four residential homes earmarked for closure. It is certainly the case that the weak and the vulnerable are bearing the brunt of the budgetary decisions. Some time ago, there were threats to take away the rewards scheme from the learning disabled in the Western Trust. In the face of public outcry, and the comments from the Health Minister, the trust had to back down and do a U-turn on that initiative.

As I have said, in addition to the proposed closure of the residential home at Drumhew, there will be cuts to day-care provision in the most rural and isolated parts of the west — in Belcoo, Garrison and Newtownbutler. There is a very strong campaign running in opposition to the proposal to close the residential home at Drumhew. It has already gathered 4,200 signatures in Lisnaskea, in east Fermanagh — I do not know how many signatures are on the petition brought here by the DUP. The campaign to oppose that closure also has the support of all the elected representatives there, and it appears that, by the time of the next meeting of Fermanagh District Council at the beginning of March, it will also have the full support of the council.

The residents and their families have expressed a high level of satisfaction with Drumhew residential home; they speak about the friendly staff and the caring and supportive environment, which are regarded as very important assets. Most of the home's residents expected to remain there for the rest of their lives. Their fears have been heightened, because it is evident, not just to them, but to everybody in the local community, that no alternative provision is being made available. The alternatives suggested by the trust — and, I note, other trusts that have appeared before the Committee — involve supported living and sheltered accommodation. However, those initiatives exist only in theory. They have not been put in place on the ground.

As I said, it is the elderly and the frail who are being hit by the cuts. A couple of weeks ago, the Minister appeared before the Health Committee and said, if I remember correctly, that he will not approve closures unless there is equal or better accommodation in place. I hope that I have recollected what he said correctly. If so, I welcome that, and I hope that the trusts will re-examine their plans.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate. I fully appreciate that many people are anxious about proposals for residential homes. As Members are aware, those proposals — I emphasise the word "proposals" — have been put forward by trusts after the decision that all Departments must achieve 3% efficiencies. For the Department of Health, that equates to some £344 million by 2011 and some £700 million over the three-year comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

That decision was made by all the parties at the Executive table, including the DUP. That enormous sum, which is the largest that has been asked of any Department, must be found in a budget that is already stretched to its limit. Since becoming Minister, I have

repeatedly stated how difficult that task will be, and I do not for one minute apologise for insisting that more money must be invested in our Health Service.

The additional money that I secured for health and social care services was won only after a hard-fought battle, and I have no doubt that that money will save lives. It has helped to introduce a range of vital, life-saving service developments, such as bowel-cancer screening, which will save up to 70 lives a year; the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccination against cervical cancer, which kills about 40 women a year here; access for up to 5,000 patients to remote monitoring; an additional 2,000 units of respite and community-based care; and the extension of breast-cancer screening for women from the age of 65 to the age of 70. Those are a few of the measures that we have been able to bring forward.

If I had accepted the original Budget allocation — which the DUP insisted that I should have done — the situation for hundreds of patients would have been much worse. Members are aware that because many of the trusts' consultations on proposals to produce those efficiency savings are ongoing, it is not appropriate for me to discuss the matter in any detail, nor can I discuss individual proposals. When the consultation processes have finished, I will look in detail at all the proposals, and I will give careful consideration to the views that have been expressed.

It is, therefore, disappointing that some Members have attempted to use this debate as a political point-scoring exercise. Let us be clear: a DUP Finance Minister proposed the efficiency savings process, and the DUP supported it in the Executive — including one of the Members who proposed the motion, and who was a Minister at that time. Furthermore, every Member of the DUP Assembly team trooped through the Lobby in support of the process. Indeed, some Members criticised me for not commencing the efficiency exercise earlier. Therefore, any attempt to distance the DUP from this process smacks of hypocrisy.

We all know that our older population is increasing rapidly. Over the next 50 years, the number of people over 65 years of age will double from 250,000 to 500,000. Our health and social care services must be equipped and ready to deal with the enormous demands of caring for that vulnerable group of people. We already spend approximately £630 million in supporting our elderly people; only acute care gets higher funding. I am committed to improving services for our older people, which is why I will invest a further £60 million over the next three years to support an additional 1,500 older people in the community. However, if we are to continue to meet the needs of our growing elderly population, we need to ensure that we are using those resources as efficiently and as effectively as possible.

Through a range of schemes, our Health Service provides a diverse range of options to support elderly care. One such option is supported living, and in October 2007, I was delighted to open Barn Halt Cottages in Carrickfergus — a scheme that provides accommodation, care and support to frail and older people, and can house up to 36 residents in 26 cottages. The scheme is designed to enable people with complex care and support needs to maintain their independence and keep links with the community. That is the type of development that I wish to see rolled out across the Province as an example of how we can maximise independence while providing reassurance that help is at hand.

Domiciliary care and supported living have featured heavily in trust consultations as potential alternatives to statutory residential care. I recognise, however, that residents in our care homes are unsure and anxious about where their needs would continue to be met.

I wish to provide absolute clarity on this matter: if a decision is taken to proceed with a home closure, there is no question of existing residents being evicted. Any suggestion that residents will be put on to the streets, without a roof over their heads, is bogus and is scaremongering at its worst. It is important to remember that many of our statutory facilities are old and not fit for purpose. It is estimated that it will take approximately £8 million to bring those facilities alone up to an acceptable standard. Members are well aware of the limited capital budget that is available to me.

I listened carefully to the concerns and issues that Members raised over the trusts' current proposals. Some Members suggested alternatives to those proposals, including cutting down on postage and travel expenses. Other Members have been keen to remind me that I have the largest share of the Budget and that I should live within my means.

Indeed, another favourite topic for Members has been the Appleby Report, and I will deal with some of the myths that they presented. I accept fully that Professor Appleby made some challenging recommendations for my Department. We have tackled that challenge head on by working in collaboration with the Department of Finance and Personnel to agree actions to meet the recommendations. Some Members conveniently quoted selective abstracts from the report in an attempt to portray a failing Health Service, and that is most unhelpful.

However, some Members conveniently overlooked the recommendation that centred on need. Professor Appleby concluded that health services in Northern Ireland receive 7% more funding than the UK average, but that those services receive considerably less than Scotland. However, independently verified research has showed that — allowing for current spending — Northern Ireland's need for health services is 10%

greater than that of England. That research also showed that Northern Ireland's need for social services is more than one third greater than that of England. Combining the two, that means that Northern Ireland is between 14% and 17% — £250 million and £300 million — worse off than England. On top of that, there is a further £300 million gap between us and England, because of the difference in extra spending up to 2011. Northern Ireland has £600 million — 15% of my overall budget — less than England to deliver a health and social care service.

Huge changes have taken place since the Appleby Report was published in 2005. In the report, Professor Appleby highlighted the fact that we could do better with the money that we have, and he recommended that we focus more on improving performance. I have focused relentlessly on improving performance since I took up office. For example, in April 2006, nearly 74,000 patients were waiting more than six months for a first outpatient appointment. In the same period, almost 6,500 patients were waiting more than six months for surgery. One year later, those lists had disappeared, and there were dramatic reductions in waiting times for surgery and outpatient appointments.

Professor Appleby said that an extra £55 million of efficiencies can be derived from the drugs budget. In fact, my Department delivered those efficiencies and a further £20 million of savings over and above those in the latest CSR period, despite some Members criticising such efficiencies. Those are tremendous achievements, and I pay tribute to staff, from all disciplines, across Northern Ireland.

Professor Appleby pointed to many good examples of new and innovative practices in the area of community care. His view was that we are going the right way, but that we should be doing more to change the way in which community care is delivered. He also pointed out that Northern Ireland used 10% more nursing and residential home care than England.

Professor Appleby also recommended significant budget rises, which, curiously, was a point that did not feature in the contributions of Members who raised the issue of the report today. Professor Appleby concluded that an increase of at least 4.3% above the rate of inflation each year up to 2013 was needed in order to maintain and improve services. Some Members ignored that key recommendation when they insisted that I accept the draft Budget. Furthermore, as I said, there is a £300 million gap between Northern Ireland and England, because of the differential between CSR settlements. Compared with the 4.3% that Professor Appleby recommended, England received an increase of 3.7% above the rate of inflation, and we received an increase of only 1.2% above the rate of inflation.

It is right that people are concerned about the damaging impact that efficiency savings might have on the Health Service. Once again, it is heartening to hear so many Members express their grave concerns about proposals to change services. However, it is sad that some Members did not recognise that independent assessment of need.

1.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that it is highly irresponsible and very bad politics for Members of this House to raise people's concerns and emotions — and to heighten their fears — about this issue without supporting the provision of proper resources for the Health Minister?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree entirely with Mr Kennedy. I do not receive enough money to do the job, and then the job is criticised because we are short of money. Who controls the purse strings?

Mr Easton: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No; the Member had his chance.

Some Members of the Assembly would do better to realise that the issue of health and social care services being under-resourced has been independently assessed, with no political agenda. It is saddening that some people still insist on playing politics with health.

I have heard many complaints that I am not doing enough to tackle administration costs. Again, that is total nonsense. The facts speak for themselves: my Department has already begun to reduce Health Service administration costs, with a three-year target of £53 million from a total administrative budget of £250 million — a 25% reduction in back-office staff and a 15% reduction in other managers. The number of senior executives will be reduced from 170 to 58, which is a reduction of two thirds. I am content that that is a sustainable reduction for health and social care. I look forward to other Departments matching that reduction when they eventually move forward with the review of public administration (RPA) as the Health Department has already done.

As for achieving efficiencies from travel expenses, postage and phone bills, trusts are already making and planning savings in those areas. Indeed, there are plans to make around £140 million — 40% of the total efficiencies — through working practices, locums, energy efficiency and phones. Each year, for example, we spend around £70 million on locums and agency and bank staff, which is 4% of our total pay cost. I accept that that is a considerable sum of money. For that reason, I welcome trust plans to reduce that figure by 15%. Having said that, we have an obligation to maintain patient safety and to keep our wards properly

staffed — even if that means using more expensive locum or agency staff in the short term.

Postage and telephone expenditure concerns some Members greatly. How else are staff supposed to contact patients and clients to advise them of appointments and to confirm test results? We must also ensure that staff are reimbursed for reasonable travel costs that are incurred in the course of doing their jobs. Do some Members really suggest that we reduce our contact with patients, or that social workers and community nurses should not be reimbursed for travelling to bring care to the population? Nonetheless, current trust proposals are targeting some £3 million of savings per annum from reduced transport and travel costs.

With regard to the amendment, all proposals must, of course, be subject to appropriate equality impact analysis. Four of the five trusts are still engaged in consultation, and none of the five has arrived at a final view. I am monitoring the consultation closely, and all final decisions about major proposals are mine to take.

I conclude by giving a simple commitment to the public, residents, their families and staff: trust proposals are not a done deal. No decisions have been made. As Minister, I will listen carefully to their views. No one will be thrown out on the street. If there is to be any change, it will be managed carefully and sensitively. Viable alternatives must be in place to provide an equivalent or better standard of care. Our health and social care services are undergoing immense change that needs to happen if we are to deliver a world-class Health Service for everyone. However, I have given my commitment that there will only be change if it is for the better.

I am in the business of looking after the most vulnerable members of society, including our elderly population. They have the same rights to health and social care services as everyone else. I will continue to improve and invest in those services to ensure that those people have access to the very best that our Health Service can provide.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I believe that the House is united today. I know that there are some differences of opinion about the CSR and who did and did not vote for what, but I welcome the contributions made in the debate on the motion, which Sinn Féin, as a party, obviously supports. I welcome, too, the references made to the amendment and the issue of equality.

The Minister supported Mr Ross's view that the amendment was, perhaps, not necessary. However, as far as the Western Health and Social Care Trust is concerned, it is necessary to mention equality proofing. I have here the consultation document from the Western Health and Social Care Trust. I studied the

document and what was said about the EQIA. I have some concerns about the responses to that, but there will probably be an opportunity in the future to raise those with the trust.

With regard to the CSR and efficiency savings: DHSSPS commissioned an audit, probably around 2005 or 2006, the final report of which was published in 2007. I have a revealing quote from that document to demonstrate that the change to residential care happened before the period of the CSR:

"Our review has identified high levels of satisfaction with the quality of care provision and the staff delivering that care in the statutory residential care sector. However, the costs associated are far in excess of the benchmarks indicating that the statutory sector is costing more than the independent alternative in Northern Ireland and UK residential costs."

I quote that excerpt because several Members pointed out that the proposed closures relate entirely to efficiency savings. I am not against efficiency savings, but I again want to make the point that the changes to residential care began some time before the period of the CSR.

In case anyone thinks that I am not going to mention Strabane, I am. I see the number of petitions in front of Mr Ross, and I heard other Members talk about the meetings that they have attended. The same is happening in West Tyrone. A meeting is due to take place on Wednesday to discuss the Greenfield residential care home, and Gortmore House is also scheduled for closure. The issue has, as Mr Robinson, I believe, said, galvanised the community, and it has done so in my constituency. The business community, the print media, the local press, the 'Strabane Weekly News' and particularly the 'Strabane Chronicle' — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs McGill: All those papers have carried articles on the subject, particularly the 'Strabane Chronicle' and the Strabane 'Herald'.

Mr McElduff: The 'Ulster Herald' has commissioned an online petition at www.ulsterherald.com/petition to highlight the importance of Gortmore House residential care home in Omagh, which, if the trust's proposal goes ahead, is due to close in September. The home employs 30 people and has 25 full-time residents. Their relatives say that those residents are likely to be dispersed to other privately run homes, but families fear that many will not survive the transition. Therefore, I would greatly appreciate the support of Members for the petition.

Mrs McGill: A degree of rivalry is evident here: it was, in fact, Conor Sharkey, a journalist on the 'Strabane Chronicle', who initiated the campaign.

By closing four of, I believe, eight homes in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, £1.5 million will be saved — that is not a lot of money.

Mr Poots: Does the Member recognise that this is not a real saving to the Health Service? It is a saving to the trust, but that money is merely transferred over to the social services side. There is no net saving for the public, because elderly residents will have to be put into the private-care sector in any event. There is no real saving to be made.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, when all this is worked out, we will see what the savings will be.

I come now to the matter of alternatives. There are no satisfactory alternatives in place at this stage. That was raised at a meeting of the Western Health and Social Services Council by Ms Reilly. Nobody is against alternatives —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has 10 seconds, and there is no alternative.

Mrs McGill: Only 10 seconds, Mr Deputy Speaker?

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

Mr Weir: This is an issue of great importance, and I suspect that it is not just the Member who spoke previously who could speak about it all day. A range of Members, from different parties, who, because of the significance of the debate, wanted to speak, have been unable to do so.

The debate today has been quite reasonable and reasoned. It is natural that when we speak about the most vulnerable in our society, there will always be an element of high emotion. Members have conveyed that well and kept that emotion in a reasonable amount of check.

We have seen the impact of these potential changes across the country from Fermanagh to Larne, from Ballynahinch to Omagh, from Bangor to Dromore, and, lest we forget, Strabane as well. The issue affects all of Northern Ireland. It is important to place on record the range of these residential homes and to express the gratitude of Members, and particularly of the families who have relatives in those homes, for the hard work and selfless dedication among the staff, many of whom provide a level of service well beyond their duty and what they are paid to do.

Although we expressed the view that we feel the motion to be adequate, we do not have a major problem with the amendment and have no desire to divide the House. We, therefore, will support the amendment as well.

I will start by dealing with some of the more contentious points that arose during the debate. With regard to efficiency savings, the Minister said that he did not want to see point-scoring. He and some of his colleagues then seemed to indulge in a degree of point-scoring on that subject. Efficiency savings apply across all Government Departments across all of the

UK. They have been agreed by all parties, as has been indicated. From that point of view, we have no intention of —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: The Member's Minister agreed that in the Executive as well as everyone else. I am happy to agree with the Health Minister that efficiency savings are something to which all parties signed up. It is an issue that affects people across all of the UK, and all Government Departments.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member join with us in making sure that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has all the finance that he needs to protect these very vulnerable services?

Mr Weir: Certainly, I believe that the Minister should have that finance. He said:

"The final budget allocation is a good news story for the health service...in light of the financial circumstances facing the Executive, I believe it is the best outcome possible."

There is a great difficulty in improving on "the best outcome possible". The point is that we want to see efficiencies. The DUP stands four-square behind efficiencies, as every party in the House should. The problem with that is that it is inflicting front line service cuts rather than efficiency savings. That is fundamentally wrong.

The Department of Health is allocated more than half the Budget, and I do not want to castigate the Minister. The cuts that have been suggested — and I note the Minister's comment that these are proposals — come from the various trusts. I believe that the trusts have got this badly wrong. I will return to that point, but, at this stage, they are just proposals.

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way in a moment.

I appreciate the position that the Minister is in today; he cannot give individual commitments to the various residential homes, and I accept that.

Consequently, I will not criticise the Minister on that front today. However, if he goes down the line of agreeing to a range of cuts, people will wish to revisit the matter, and there will be high levels of anger in the community. Therefore, until I hear what he has to say after the consultation period, I will suspend my judgment.

1.30 pm

Mr Shannon: I take note of the Member's concerns. When KPMG investigated the costs of keeping Loch Cuan House open, it said that there would have to be a change to independent accommodation and to what it referred to as a "supported housing scheme".

Subsequently, the trust informed the home, residents, elected representatives and staff, and expectations were raised. Does the Member agree that to change things now would be paying lip service to that consultation?

Mr Weir: I agree with the Member. If expectations have been raised and promises made, it is important to deliver on them.

The Minister said that approximately £8 million of capital costs would be required. However, in response to questions for written answer from me and from other Members, he said that, in the past few years, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has spent approximately £50 million on capital works. That was just one trust. Indeed, the trust is due to receive further resources of approximately £53 million.

My colleague Alex Easton referred to Ravara House residential care home, which is in my constituency. Approximately £250,000 a year, and in the region of £500,000 for capital works, is required to keep that home going. Given that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which is proposing those closures, has a capital budget that is more than £50 million a year and is due to receive £53 million in additional resources, it ought to be able to find £250,000 a year and £500,000 for capital works in order to keep Ravara House going. Throughout Northern Ireland, trusts have fallen down on their duties.

Several Members highlighted the fact that the elderly population is growing. Indeed, Michelle O'Neill and Carmel Hanna said that, although there have been moves to support independent living, such provision is not yet in place, and the complexity and flexibility of needs must be considered. However, although there may be greater moves towards independent living and nursing homes, the growing elderly population means that there will always be a gap in provision. Moreover, supporting more people in their homes for as long as possible will place a greater burden on respite care, so, in the future, increased respite care provision will be required in Northern Ireland.

Many trusts claim that the number of people in residential homes is declining. I believe that that is an artificial claim. For several years, the intake in many homes, including Ravara House, has, in effect, been zero, so we must question the extent to which some of those homes have been managed in order to prevent people from coming in. Nevertheless, if the number of people in residential homes continues to decline, there will surely be a greater burden on respite care, and that is the area in which the slack must be taken up.

Although we can all quote statistics — and several Members have — there are human stories behind those statistics. I welcome the Minister's confirmation that no one will be thrown onto the streets — no one would expect that to be the case. However, concerns go

beyond that eventuality; people have a right to live in dignity in the homes in which they are already resident.

If we were beginning afresh, there would be an argument for reconsidering where to build new residential homes. However, we are where we are, and people have been in homes for many years. Therefore, in addition to not being thrown onto the streets, people want to live for as long as they can in those homes, and that should not be too difficult to achieve. If the trusts reconsider, a way forward can be found for residential homes.

The finances are available to provide that. We must ensure that efficiency savings do not become front line cuts, and we must stand beside our elderly. I hope that the Minister will take on board what has been said today. If the unfortunate situation arises in which the trusts rubber-stamp their own proposals — and many Members question how genuine the trusts' consultation processes were — it is hoped that the Minister will stand up to them and ensure that people have the dignity and the opportunity to remain in their residential homes.

I support the motion, as amended.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its opposition to the proposed closure of residential care homes by a number of Health and Social Care Trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to intervene and listen to the concerns of the community and take appropriate action to minimise the pain, stress and anxiety that this uncertainty has created among elderly care home residents, their families and health workers; and further calls on the Minister to ensure that any proposals coming from Trusts are equality proofed so that services are available for those most in need.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Prison Service

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

Mr McCartney: I beg to move

That the Assembly calls on the Prison Service to implement in full the recommendations made by the Prisoner Ombudsman in the report into the death of Colin Bell in Maghaberry Prison on 1 August 2008.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirim leis an rún seo a mholadh, agus táimid ag lorg tacaíochta dó trasna an Tionóil. Fuair Colin Bell bás ar 1 Lúnasa na bliana seo chuaigh thart, agus d'fhoilsigh an Prisoner Ombudsman a thuairisc ar 9 mí Eanáir na bliana seo. Seo na rudaí atáimid a phlé sa Tionól inniu.

This is an important motion, and one that should be supported by all Members. The death of Colin Bell in Maghaberry Prison on 1 August 2008 has been investigated by the Prisoner Ombudsman. Its report, findings and recommendations were published on 9 January 2009.

Although Colin Bell took his own life, one will see from reading the report that the death could have been avoided and that a series of failures in the system allowed him to die as he did. The circumstances of his death serve to highlight the failings of a system which, if adhered to properly, should have prevented any person in custody from taking their own life in the way that Colin Bell took his.

I commend the office of the Prisoner Ombudsman for the report and the thorough and appropriately sensitive manner in which the death was investigated. The Prisoner Ombudsman ensured that the most comprehensive report possible was brought into the public domain. If implemented, the report's recommendations — of which there are 44 — will ensure that a death similar to Colin Bell's can, and should be, avoided in the future.

The report and its recommendations point to the failings, which ran throughout the prison system. The report mentions the mindset that produced Colin Bell's behaviour and his cry for help. It seems that something of a power struggle developed, and the prison administration took the view that Colin Bell had to be taught to accept that he cannot be the "winner".

There was a failure in the system which ignored its own guidelines, and that permitted Colin Bell to be naked, without bedding, in his cell for a number of days. The system also failed to recognise — or chose

to ignore — the needs of a man who had a history of self-harming and that he wrapped his feet in toilet paper in order to protect himself from the cold. Furthermore, the system failed to supervise those charged with monitoring Colin Bell in his cell. When I say that the system failed, I mean that it failed.

Rather than watch Colin Bell on closed-circuit television (CCTV), prison staff chose to watch television, play computer games or make use of a makeshift camp bed and go to sleep. The system failed because the warder charged with watching the watchers followed the set example and practice and did not do his job.

This was not a one-off, single event; such behaviour was endemic. To fully understand why the recommendations in the report need to be implemented, one need only recall the response to the report of a senior member of the Prison Officers' Association (POA). He told the BBC that, rather than facing disciplinary investigation, the two governors should be complimented for keeping Colin Bell alive for as long as they did. Thankfully, the response of the Prisons Minister, Paul Goggins, and the director of the Prison Service, Robin Masfield, is in stark contrast to that view.

Paul Goggins accepts that Colin's death "should not have happened" and should have been avoided, and Robin Masfield also accepts:

"the standard of care ... was below the standard that we set ourselves."

Mr Goggins said that the death of Colin Bell "will be a watershed". If we are to have a watershed — and the Assembly will have a role in ensuring that that happens — we must reverse the mindset expressed by the senior member of the POA. We also have to reverse the thinking that sees the prison regime setting out with the purpose of showing a vulnerable prisoner that there is only one winner.

The report by the Prisoner Ombudsman must be the first step in that process. It is regrettable that there is no Minister here today to comment on it; however, today's motion should act as a signal that the Assembly will ensure that, in the weeks and months ahead, the 44 recommendations in that report will be implemented, and that similar situations can be avoided in the future. Mar sin de molaim an rún seo.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The circumstances surrounding the death of Colin Bell while in prison, in the custody of our state, are disgraceful. It should be said that the circumstances that led to his being in jail were also quite disgraceful. I welcome the fact that there is a Prisoner Ombudsman and that we have this report. We must all feel content that those who are detained in custody are properly and safely detained, protected from each other and also — particularly in this case — from themselves.

There have been numerous cases of prisoners and prison staff being murdered. One MLA has previously indicated the role that his organisation played in the murder of a prison officer. There are numerous examples of prisoners being murdered by other prisoners while in custody — the most noteworthy is the murder of Billy Wright. There are also many examples of prisoners, for a variety of reasons, harming themselves and posing a significant and very real danger not only to themselves but to other prisoners and, at times, prison staff.

As has been said, Colin Bell was a self-harmer — notoriously so, according to the ombudsman's report. He ultimately and tragically took his own life in circumstances that could have been prevented. I agree with many of the recommendations in the report of the Prisoner Ombudsman — many of them are practical and many of them have been, or are beginning to be, implemented. That kick-start to reform is a welcome and very good result from what were very tragic circumstances.

I want to draw attention to two of the recommendations which highlight the very difficult circumstances of this case. Recommendation 11 is that the use of makeshift beds to relax or sleep during night shifts must be strictly forbidden. That tells its own story — prison officers are there to do night duty, not to sleep. Recommendation 13 states that televisions that have been brought into protective units should be removed. Once again, prison officers are there to do duty, not to watch television. Those recommendations highlight some of the significant failings that led to this particular case.

My concern is that the overall support for the ombudsman's report suggests that the ombudsman got it right — she did not, and we should face up to that. The report does not go far enough, as it fails to put blame where it ought to be and instead scapegoats prison night staff, governors, and people who, quite simply, implemented policy that was put in place by the Northern Ireland Office.

1.45 pm

Six years ago, Northern Ireland Office policy-makers took a decision to save money, and the consequence of that decision was to put in place non-trained prison officers to do night duty, which is a difficult job. It involves looking after vulnerable people and people who, at times, can self-harm. Those policy-makers decided to install people who were not properly trained to do that job. Through no fault of those individuals, penny-pinching savings were made, which had consequences. One of the consequences was that people who were not trained to do a particular job were held responsible and accountable for something that started at the Northern Ireland Office.

The report should have gone further and pointed out that it was a policy decision taken by a Minister, implemented by officials, and pushed on to governors and prison staff. The prison officers and prison staff whom I know do not want to go into jails and harm people — they want to do their job. The report falls short, in that it draws a line and says that it was that group of staff that was solely, absolutely and completely responsible for the death, when the Northern Ireland Office should be taking its share of the blame.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The report should lay the blame where it really rests, which, in this case, is with the political masters.

Mr Cree: I commend the Prisoner Ombudsman, Pauline McCabe, and her office for the timeliness and diligence with which they have exposed the reality of Colin Bell's life and death. They have pursued transparency, and we must pay heed to the recommendations that are outlined in the report. It is shocking to see that many of the recommendations appear, to a lay person, to be basic good practice. I am disappointed that those common-sense proposals are not in place already, or have not been adhered to strictly. This time, we must ensure that those best-practice recommendations are implemented in full.

I recognise that it is a difficult job for prison staff to prevent a prisoner who is intent on taking his life. I commend the actions and the hard work of many of the prison officers and prison staff who are dedicated to helping all those in their care, amid a thorny, and often charged, environment.

However, in that case, in the 30 hours before Colin Bell's death, there certainly appears to have been no due care demonstrated among the night staff for the highly troubled, vulnerable and strictly distressed prisoner. Many opportunities arose for the night staff to intervene, if they had simply been doing their job. We must ask ourselves what is the right thing to do, and then do it.

Pauline McCabe has told us what needs to be done to improve the situation for vulnerable prisoners in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that the Northern Ireland Prison Service does what it should. My party is committed to law and order, and I want us to be tough on people who go into prison. I want recidivism to be reduced, and I want prisoners to be challenged, to be educated and to be forced to take responsibility for their crimes. I do not want a system that breaks further the lives of those who need to be robustly rehabilitated.

My party is about responsibility: we must make the offender responsible for his or her actions and address the root causes of the crime. However, I also advocate responsibility, not merely for the offender but for those

in charge. We need to take this man's death, and the systematic failures that led to his death, seriously. To do less would be wrong.

On 9 January, the Prisoner Ombudsman published 44 recommendations. The implementation of those recommendations will be reviewed in six months' time. I hope that we will not merely see a series of further reviews by the Northern Ireland Prison Service but a comprehensive and resolute implementation of the recommendations. I recognise that the Prison Service has a difficult role to play in managing our offenders. However, we must do more and demand much more. We have placed the Prisoner Ombudsman in a key position, and, therefore, we must take heed of her recommendations and put them into practice. I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the motion and Mr McCartney's speech. I do so for a number of reasons, not only because of the importance of the Prisoner Ombudsman's report but because the motion brings the Assembly's attention back to general issues involving prisons and prisoners.

Whether devolution of policing and justice happens sooner or later, it will happen, and when it does so, it will fall to a Minister and to the Chamber to deal not only with the report's recommendations but the policy and financial implications of the creation of the Parole Commissioners and of a new prison in the North, as well as the implications of various reports from the Criminal Justice Inspection. Consequently, the debate is timely, because it makes us more fully aware of the policy and financial responsibilities on a wide range of prisoner matters that will fall to the Chamber and to a Minister in the event of devolution and justice.

When the report was published, the SDLP simply said that the recommendations should be accepted in full and should be responded to quickly. Given that there is a high level of political agreement, subject to one or two comments from the Member for North Antrim Ian Paisley Jnr, that should be the standard against which we judge how Minister Paul Goggins responds to the report, to which, I believe, he is well intentioned.

As other Members have already said, the narrative of the report is disturbing, the findings are damning, and, worst of all, the conclusion must be drawn that Colin Bell's death was avoidable. In acknowledging the report, we must also acknowledge the work of the Prisoner Ombudsman. She has brought the same rigour, exhaustive inquiry and evidence base to that investigation and report as she has brought to her other contributions to public service in the North.

We must also acknowledge that the Prisoner Ombudsman has flagged up issues concerning her ability to investigate the deaths of prisoners in custody.

Up until 2005, the Prisoner Ombudsman would not have investigated such a death: it was only in 2005 that her remit was expanded to include deaths in custody. There have been 17 such deaths up to January 2009, 10 of which are still under investigation. The Prisoner Ombudsman has said that, if she is to be able to do her job — which involves investigating deaths, including avoidable deaths — she needs to have the necessary budget line. As was the case with this report, there are clear cost implications to providing the legal framework and the clinical input required to enable her to determine whether a death was avoidable or to investigate the general circumstances of the death. We must take that advice on board.

The report highlights cultural issues not only in the Prison Service but in the Prison Officers' Association. We must deal with all those who manage prisoners — those who work on the front line and with prisoners in cells, those who work in offices and who serve as governors, and, as Ian Paisley Jnr mentioned, those who set policy directives. My concern is that, unless we deal with all the issues of culture and conduct that are manifest in some of those places, we will be unable to implement fully the report's recommendations.

That said, I am reassured, not only because Paul Goggins is the Minister involved but because the current director of the Prison Service has demonstrated that he is up for change and reform. He has demonstrated that not only in his work in the Prison Service but in other areas of his public-service career to date. If we can draw conclusions from him and from other people, not least from the Prisoner Ombudsman, it may be that there will be no repeat of this case in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: At the outset, I thank the proposers of the motion, and, like others, I pay tribute to the Prisoner Ombudsman, Pauline McCabe, for her commitment to, and quality of, the report. Like Mr Attwood, I wish to highlight the importance of proper funding and of ensuring that her office is placed on a proper statutory footing, so that a proper watchdog is in place to oversee what is happening in prisons.

Colin Bell belonged in prison. I am familiar with the crime that he committed in Bangor in 2003. It was an arson attack, which led to a murder. However, the duty of protection, which Mr Cree outlined, works both ways. There is a duty on the Prison Service to protect society as a whole from people who have committed crimes and who are at risk of committing further crimes. Equally, there is a duty of care on the Prison Service to protect prisoners, particularly those who are in a very vulnerable situation. We need to be very conscious of the sheer number of vulnerable prisoners at this time.

The report from the Prisoner Ombudsman is extremely serious, and it points to major systemic failures in the overall system, at an individual level — although perhaps we should not go into too much detail about that, because disciplinary proceedings will, undoubtedly, be unfolding — and at a managerial level, which, again, may be addressed through formal procedures elsewhere.

We also need to be conscious of the mental health and personality disorder aspect behind this case. The report does, I believe, accept that, on balance, the direct decisions that were taken at a clinical level were correct, and I think that the input from Professor Roy McClelland bears that out. However, it recognises that there is an importance in bringing a wider range of psychological or psychotherapeutic inputs to the table, particularly in very complex cases such as that of Colin Bell.

We need to be mindful that there is a much higher incidence of mental-health problems in the prisoner population than in the population as a whole. Even beyond that, there is a very strong incidence of personality disorder issues in the prisoner population than in the population as a whole. That whole issue of how to address personality disorders, as opposed to direct depressive or psychotic aspects of mental health, is a challenge right across the board with regard to Barmston and the current consultations in the Department of Health. However, it is an extremely acute issue in prisons.

The report is a watershed for the Prison Service, and for those who manage it, and I take comfort from the response from the Minister of State, Paul Goggins, and the director general of the Prison Service, Robin Masefield. However, the report highlights some broader issues to which we need to face up in relation to our prisons. We need to look at the working practices of prison officers. Clearly, we are still suffering from the legacy of the Troubles when prison officers had to adopt a particular approach to managing the situation in prisons. We must also recognise how our prison officers withstood actual violence and the threat of violence during the Troubles, including that which was directed at their families on the outside.

On Friday, I attended the funeral of a gentleman from my constituency who was extremely badly beaten during the Maze breakout, and who was retired from the Prison Service as a consequence. Furthermore, when I was Mayor of North Down in 2007, I also had the privilege of hosting a freedom of the borough ceremony to recognise the contribution of the Prison Service.

We need to have a change in culture and a move away from simply guarding prisoners to protecting prisoners and actively working towards their rehabilitation.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept that that issue goes right to the heart of what I said? If there is a situation whereby prison staff do these things off their own bat, then yes, they are ultimately to blame.

However, if there is a policy directive and a political impetus behind that policy, the blame ought to go to the heart of where it rests, which is with the political masters and the people at the NIO, instead of simply saying that it is about the governor or the deputy governor and the staff. It is much more problematic than the report allows us to believe.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. We need a twin-track approach to the issue. A clear policy decision has to be taken at the top level, with co-operation from those who are in a delivery position in the Prison Service at a managerial level and from those who are on the prison floor with regard to moving the issue forward.

That points to the wider challenge of resources. The running costs per prisoner in Northern Ireland are significantly greater than those of England and Wales. We do not enjoy the economies of scale that exist elsewhere. There is a need for further capital investment in our prisons, whether they be women's prisons or open prisons. We need improvements to Maghaberry Prison, in addition to the plans that exist for Magilligan Prison. Things may have to be done differently in the Prison Service in order to better manage the scarce resources that are available.

2.00 pm

It is also important that the debate on policing and justice does not focus too much on policing, to the neglect of what happens after people are arrested, go to court and to prison. In particular, there should be a focus on mental-health issues. Much more resources must go into prisons to ensure that we do not leave people vulnerable.

Mr Poots: I am concerned that the issue is being looked at in a simplistic light and, therefore, I am concerned about the motion and the report from the Prisoner Ombudsman. The motion clearly levels blame at the Prison Service and the governors of prisons.

I find the whole affair very sad. It is sad that Colin Bell has died, that he was in prison in the first instance and that another family suffered as a consequence of Colin Bell's actions. That family still grieves for the loss of its loved one — we should never lose sight of that.

Nonetheless, the Prison Service has a responsibility, when members of the public are found guilty of crimes and incarcerated, to look after those individuals while they are in its care and under its authority. I recognise that there are many Members in the Chamber who have much more experience of prison than I have. Nonetheless, I represent the constituency in which the prison in question is located.

Many of the recommendations of the report are practical, sensible and acceptable. However, I take issue with the recommendation that picks out the governor and deputy governor and suggests that they go through a disciplinary process. The governor and deputy governor have had to go through a process imposed on them by the Northern Ireland Office. If we had a Minister for justice in the Chamber, we could challenge him as to why he imposed policies on the Prison Service. One cannot blame the governor and deputy governor for introducing night custody officers at a considerably lower cost than prison officers; they had no choice. They had to implement the policy of the Northern Ireland Office, which was to bring in people on the cheap to carry out that duty. Therefore, because the Prisoner Ombudsman has gone after the governor and deputy governor and absolutely missed the Northern Ireland Office Minister who brought that policy about, the report is fundamentally flawed and we cannot accept the motion.

Colin Bell's death is something that we all regret. We can apply the recommendations so that nothing like it happens again. However, we must not use the Prison Service as a scapegoat in this situation. The Prison Service does its difficult job to the best of its ability. A sizeable number of prisoners wish to have political status. All sorts of problems exist in that prison — not because of the workings of the Prison Service or the staff, but because of external influences.

Members need to state that they support the Prison Service, that they support prison officers in doing their difficult task and that they will not go down the route of putting the boot into the Prison Service because of this event. This was a problem that was handed to it; it was not of its making.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for not being here for the beginning of the debate. I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very important debate. As previous Members have said, it is very clear that Colin Bell was a very vulnerable person and that when he needed the help of the prison system, that system failed him. His death in custody highlighted how the system fails most prisoners.

He is not the first person to die in prison custody; throughout the years, quite a number of people have died in custody, such as two women, Annie Kelly, who died in September 2002, and Roseanne Irvine, who died in 2004. There were several reports into prison conditions at that time, and there needs to be a root and branch change to the prison system and prison conditions.

I want to speak about the vulnerability of some women prisoners in particular. Last year, I visited Hydebank Wood and saw, at first hand, the conditions that women prisoners there were living in. They were

being locked up for long periods of time; they had the humiliation of strip searches; and there was a lack of contact with family and friends. Those women were in an all-male prison and, therefore, their movements were very restricted. As a former political prisoner, I empathise with those women, as I also experienced those degrading conditions at first hand. The conditions were unacceptable then and they are unacceptable now. People in prison have rights, and those rights need to be respected.

I welcome the ombudsman's report, which is very clear and concise. The ombudsman makes a number of recommendations, which, if implemented, would improve prison conditions. The mental and physical health of prisoners is important, but their emotional health is of particular importance, and the lack of constructive programmes to assist personal or social development is a core problem.

The Prison Service has been referred to, and, I have to say that — root and branch, from the administration staff to the staff on the wings — there has been no change in the Prison Service since the time when people such as me were in prison. The same attitude is visible now. Change is needed, and the recommendations must be implemented. Therefore, I support the motion, *Go raibh maith agat*.

Mr B McCrea: Prison is not supposed to be a holiday camp. I listened to the Member who spoke previously, talking about injustices and about how things are not right. I have to say, the world has gone mad. Victims of crime are the issue; the people who are in prison are there because they have done wrong. I am all for looking after people's human rights and for making sure that those are not abused unnecessarily; however, we must not lose sight of the fact that society has a right to rid itself of people who are trying to do it wrong.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that there are a number of people in prison who really should not be there? Their mental, emotional and psychological health is at risk in prison, and they could be in other community-based systems. I am talking about the non-payment of fines. There are a number of women who are in Hydebank Wood because of non-payment of television licences and non-payment of the resulting fines. Does the Member agree that not everyone in prison should be there in the first place?

Mr B McCrea: It may astonish the Member to hear that I agree with her about the reasons why certain people are in prison. However, the point that I was reacting to is that the primary role of the criminal justice system is to protect society from people who cause damage to life or limb.

I have had the privilege of attending the graduations of newly qualified night custody officers. An illuminating

part of that was to understand the real challenges that they face.

Some Members have raised the issue of the cost of prisons. Prisons used to be — and probably still are — very dangerous places in which to work, not only for the people who work there but for their families. If costs are to be reduced, and if we are to get things right, we have to become a normal society in which everyone supports the rule of law and order.

Along with my party colleagues, I am prepared to support the motion, but only in the context that we want to see the Northern Ireland Prison Service at its professional best. There are working processes that no matter what way one looks at them, are not satisfactory. There are also issues for which there is no defence. We do not defend those issues, and we have taken the strong position of saying that they should be addressed. DUP colleagues have asked who was to blame, but I do not seek to highlight governors or deputy governors. There is systemic failure, and people need help to address it. The simplistic notion of pointing fingers at particular people will not fix the system and is not correct. I want to find a way of making it better.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member agree that by accepting the report in full, he is limiting the responsibility and the changes that are possible? The report does not ask the Northern Ireland Office, the policymakers or Ministers to be responsible and politically accountable for their actions.

Mr B McCrea: I understood the arguments made by Mr Paisley and Mr Poots. Although the Ulster Unionist Party accepts those arguments, ultimately, we are supporting the report because we recognise that there have been serious failings. In doing so, we do not think that the buck stops with the governors or with those who have been identified. We take the DUP's argument in the context of what we are voting on; we want to find ways of improving the Prison Service for the whole of society.

I find it strange that in a previous debate on another subject, we were looking at saving money on postage, whereas in other areas being debated, there is massive underinvestment and people are being asked to do things that are simply not right.

There are dangerous prisoners who try to abscond, and they use hospital wings as their way out. In addition, some prisoners need to be moved securely from one area to another. Those people know what they are about, and they are not the people to whom Ms McCann referred earlier. There are issues about the withdrawal of privileges and the management of the system. Many of the recommendations outlined by Mr Poots contain aspects that we can support.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the recommendations; we want the Prison Service to fix its working

practices. We wholeheartedly support the brave men and women who act as prison officers. However, shoddy work, Spanish practices, and people not doing the jobs that they are paid for are not acceptable to us or to anyone else in the Assembly. Therefore, we support the motion with the caveats that we outlined.

Mr A Maginness: If there is one thing that this disturbing report highlights, it is the need for the Assembly to have confidence and control over the Prison Service as soon as possible. Therefore, I reiterate the argument that the SDLP has made many times from these Benches: policing and justice powers should be transferred to the Assembly as soon as possible.

2.15 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept, therefore, that if policing and justice powers had been devolved at the time of the report's publication, the person who would be held to account would not be the prison governor, deputy governor or night-duty clerk? The Minister would be held to account. The person who would be responsible, yet who is left out of the report, would be the Minister, and thereby the NIO.

Mr A Maginness: I certainly accept that. That is the nature of democratic accountability. In fact, it should be the standard that is applied in dealing with a situation that happens on a justice Minister's watch.

I re-emphasise the point that it is important that the Assembly expedite the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland. In some ways, the debate is futile, because the Assembly does not have direct responsibility. It is simply an observer — a bystander — when it should be a participant in the control of the Prison Service.

I will direct my remarks to the report in particular. Colleagues have mentioned several aspects, which I will not re-examine. However, I will comment on the narrative of that unfortunate man's death. For more than three years, he had been a conforming prisoner. Indeed, he had shown few signs of disturbance. The fact is that in March 2008, he was dealt with for stealing a photograph frame. The incident triggered something in the man's behaviour. It caused him to misbehave. I wonder whether the original decision on his stealing the frame was the correct one. Should the man not have been dealt with on a different level? Was the reaction to the man's misdemeanour disproportionate? I ask that question of people who examine such issues.

Furthermore, the man seems to have suffered not from mental illness but from a personality disorder. That is an important distinction. Professor McClelland makes that plain in his report to the Prisoner Ombudsman. In his report, he talks about a power struggle between the prison authorities and the prisoner. Is that the correct way for the prison authorities to conduct their relationship with a prisoner who has

offended? Is it a matter of beating the man down, so to speak, and showing him who is boss? I am not convinced that that is the right way in which to proceed with a prisoner who may be suffering from a personality disorder.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I cannot give way, because I will run out of time.

Dr Farry: The Member would get an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: I would not, because I have already been given an extra minute.

Furthermore, the man manifested his disturbance by talking about what he deemed to be paramilitary threats, which were assessed to be non-existent by the prison authorities. He was moved 30 times. I wonder whether that action was appropriate.

Mr Paisley mentioned the night-custody officers. My understanding of the Prison Service is that night-custody officers are specially trained for those duties. Obviously, they failed in respect of that man — manifestly so. Everyone can acknowledge that. I wonder whether that was due to penny-pinching and saving costs.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I cannot give way. At present, in the Northern Ireland Prison Service, costs per prisoner are excessive compared with those of any other part of the UK or, I believe, the Republic.

We have to examine that, because we cannot keep ploughing excessive amounts of money into the Prison Service. I do not want the service provided for prisoners to be undermined in any way, but we must examine the whole cost base of the Prison Service and the prison estate.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring the motion before the Chamber, and I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate.

There has been a huge deal of concern throughout the community about Colin Bell's death and the findings of the Prisoner Ombudsman's subsequent investigation. I am extremely conscious of the feelings of the family of Colin Bell's victim. They cannot and should not be forgotten, and all of us must acknowledge their hurt and be conscious of their ongoing grief and anguish throughout this process.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the ombudsman's investigation was a damning indictment of the Prison Service. Warders were found to have been sleeping on duty, and Colin Bell's repeated attempts to take his own life were not observed, despite the fact that CCTV

footage of his cell was supposed to be monitored constantly. Members have recognised those concerns in the Chamber today.

My colleague Raymond McCartney spoke of the failings of the prison system and said that Colin Bell's cry for help went unheard. He also talked about the lack of care shown in the behaviour of prison staff and recommended the full implementation of the Prisoner Ombudsman's report; I fully endorse those views.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr spoke of the circumstances that led to Colin Bell's death and those that led to him being in prison, and he said that those were equally disgraceful. He said that although he agrees with many of the recommendations, he has issues with some of them and would have preferred the ombudsman's report to have gone much further. He also talked about prison warders on night duty not being properly trained. I do not know what training one needs to do night duty when one is being paid to do night duty as opposed to being asleep.

Leslie Cree mentioned the shocking nature of the report and said that there appears to have been no duty of care on the part of the night staff on duty on the evening of Colin Bell's death and spoke of the need for the recommendations to be implemented in full.

Mr Alex Attwood spoke about the devolution of policing and justice and how that Ministry will fall to someone in the Chamber. Therefore, the consequences of this incident and the ombudsman's report will have to be considered by a local Minister. Mr Attwood also said that the Prisoner Ombudsman needs a budget line to carry out her work fully; we endorse that view.

Stephen Farry also endorsed what Mr Attwood had said. He said that the Prisoner Ombudsman should not only be properly funded but put on a statutory footing; once again, Raymond McCartney and I concur with that feeling. Mr Farry spoke about the issue of mental illness and how it related to the case of Colin Bell. He also said that there is a higher incidence of mental-health problems in the prison population as a whole. All MLAs know constituents who have ended up in prison but who should have been placed in mental-health units. My colleague Jennifer McCann spoke about that issue. Indeed, one governor told me that the prison was full of prisoners who should be in mental-health units instead.

Edwin Poots expressed concerns about many of the recommendations. Although he views many of the recommendations to be practical and sensible, he took issue with the one relating to the governor and deputy governor. He focused on the NIO's policy of bringing people into prison to perform a duty on the cheap.

My colleague Jennifer McCann spoke of Annie Kelly and Roseanne Irvine, two other prisoners who took their own lives, and the fact that the reports and

recommendations that followed their deaths had not been fully implemented.

Basil McCrea said that prison is not supposed to be a holiday camp. As one who has been there, I assure him that it certainly is not. He said that he will support the motion in order to ensure that the Prison Service is at its best, and he discussed the systematic failures and said that help is needed to address those failings.

The Prisoner Ombudsman's 44 recommendations must now be implemented fully. Some Members made points about policy, but the motion does not limit the scope of holding those responsible to account, and DUP Members who spoke should take that into account. Sinn Féin supports any examination of prison policy that will ensure that the issues outlined during the debate are addressed.

The issue goes much further than the Colin Bell case: there were 11 jail suicides between 1996 and 2008, 10 of which occurred in Maghaberry. In many cases, the inquest coroner's recommendations have gone unheeded and unheard. Indeed, the Ombudsman's investigation is the latest in a line of similar reports in recent years that have expressed grave concerns about the prison system.

Unfortunately, the warnings have been ignored, recommendations have not been implemented and vulnerable prisoners will continue to die. A fundamental sea change is needed in the prison system. As we emerged from conflict, there was no Patten-style reform of the prison system. That must happen. The long overdue transfer of policing and justice — as some Members referred to — will help to overhaul the system's failings. However, we can make a start now by ensuring that the Ombudsman's recommendations are implemented fully.

Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that authorities have a positive obligation to protect life, which arises when they know, or ought to know, of a real and imminent risk to a prisoner's life, even if the threat comes from the individuals themselves.

The Prison Service policy on self-harm and suicide prevention aims to identify prisoners at risk of suicide or self-harm and provides the necessary support and care in order to minimise the harm that an individual may cause to himself or herself. That policy has obviously not been implemented fully, because in a 30-hour period before his death, Colin Bell tried to contact the Samaritans 73 times via a link-up facility in his cell. Sixty-three attempts were unsuccessful because of technical difficulties. Prison staff lay on a makeshift bed, watched TV, drank tea and coffee and smoked, while ignoring Colin Bell's suicide attempts.

As Raymond McCartney said, for two days, Colin Bell wrapped toilet paper round his feet to stay warm. That is absolutely appalling. He killed himself at the

fourth attempt, but for almost 40 minutes, officers did not realise that he was dead. Three days before Colin Bell's death, prison staff assured his mother that his life was not under threat.

In the North, there are more prison staff than inmates; there are approximately 2,300 prison staff, about 1,800 of whom are prison officers. That amounts to a higher number than the prison population. Therefore, a failure to implement the policy of self-harm and suicide prevention cannot be blamed on understaffing or lack of training. Although it is regrettable that policing and justice powers have not been devolved, I acknowledge the British Minister's comments that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue immediately after Question Time, when Ms Anderson will continue her winding-up speech.

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

Mr Speaker: Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn.

Post-Primary Transfer

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the proposals of the Minister of Education on the future of post-primary transfer were last discussed at an Executive meeting. (AQO 2108/09)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The contents of Executive papers are confidential, as are all aspects of Executive business. The Member will be aware of the statement made to the Assembly by the Minister of Education on 2 February.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the deputy First Minister agree that, in the light of the chaos surrounding the future of post-primary education, including an unregulated system of transfer and the unions' threat to instruct their members not to prepare children for potential tests, the Executive should hold a special meeting with a single-item agenda — namely, the future of our children's education — as proposed by my party colleague Margaret Ritchie, as long ago as last May?

The deputy First Minister: The issue of post-primary transfer reform was raised at a number of Executive meetings in 2007 and 2008, but no agreed Executive position was reached. The Minister of Education submitted a draft Executive paper on post-primary transfer arrangements for the Executive meeting of the 17 January 2008. It was agreed that consideration of that paper would be deferred and that a dedicated meeting of the Executive should be scheduled to address the issue.

The Minister of Education submitted a draft Executive paper on post-primary transfer reform for the Executive meeting on 15 May. At that meeting, there was detailed discussion of the process that could be put in place to consider the Minister's paper, but the content of the paper was not considered by the Executive.

At the Executive meeting of 15 January 2009, the Minister of Education indicated that she would shortly submit a memorandum to the Executive. That paper was circulated on 27 January but was not tabled for discussion at the Executive meeting on 29 January. The Minister of Education wrote to the First Minister and me on 30 January to inform us that she intended to make a statement to the Assembly on transfer 2010; that statement was made on 2 February.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, does the deputy First Minister share my surprise that the Member who spoke previously does not welcome the fact that teachers are refusing to prepare children for transfer tests? Secondly, is it not the case that the Minister of Education can, and does, issue guidelines from time to time?

The deputy First Minister: In her statement of 2 February, the Minister of Education advised that she was issuing guidance on post-primary admissions under article 30 of the Education Order 2006, which states:

“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”.

Mr B McCrea: I assure the Minister that I know who he is and what he is. How many papers has the Education Minister circulated to the Executive since assuming office? How many of those papers related to post-primary transfer? Were there any key differences between those various papers?

The deputy First Minister: In the answer that I gave previously, I gave a clear and detailed rundown of the number of papers and requests that were submitted by the Minister of Education to the Executive.

Dr Farry: Does the deputy First Minister believe that the decisions that were taken by the Education Minister fall under the definition of a “significant or controversial” item that is outside the context of the Programme for Government, which, under the ministerial code, would therefore require an Executive decision?

The deputy First Minister: The Minister of Education, acting as the Minister of Education, has made her position absolutely clear, and she has, on a number of occasions, submitted to the Executive clear indications of how she intended to proceed. I have given a full answer today in relation to all of the contributions made to the Executive by the Minister.

We all clearly understand that, as a result of the decisions that were taken by those who were responsible for putting an Executive agenda in place, we now have a situation in which the Minister of Education has decided that she must issue guidance. Given her responsibility as a Minister, and the fact that the debate

has been going on for quite some time, we must see the outworking of that situation. There may be a determination on whether decisions are significant or controversial at a later stage in the process.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Single Equality Bill

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the timetable for the single equality Bill. (AQO 2110/09)

The deputy First Minister: We continue to legislate in order to provide legal protection against discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity. Since the restoration of the institutions, we have introduced legislation to strengthen and improve the rights of individuals in a number of different areas. We have introduced several changes to disability discrimination legislation in order to improve the lives of disabled people here. For example, we have amended the definition of disability so that people with progressive conditions are deemed to be disabled from the point of diagnosis. We have made it unlawful to treat a disabled person less favourably than others for a disability reason in the disposal or management of residential, commercial and other premises. We have also imposed new duties on public authorities and private clubs to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people.

In the area of gender equality, our law was amended in order to give effect to the European gender goods and services directive. We also brought forward regulations to amend the Sex Discrimination Order 1976 in order to ensure that we fully complied with the European equal treatment amendment directive. We are currently consulting on the removal of the transport exemption that pertains to the right of access to goods, facilities and services contained in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 in order to make it unlawful for transport operators to discriminate against a disabled person.

Following the close of the consultation period, we will move quickly to amend the law. In addition to strengthening the framework of equality legislation, the Executive have agreed the policy approach that is intended to reduce inequalities further in the areas of age, gender and race, and the inequalities that result from poverty and exclusion. The Executive will soon consider proposals to tackle the inequalities that are experienced by people with disabilities, in line with their statutory section 75 duty.

We are aware that the European Commission has produced a draft directive to extend protection against discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, disability, age or sexual orientation in the area of goods

and services. We must ensure that our citizens enjoy the same protections as others do across the European Union. We will therefore consider the implications of those developments in deciding the future direction of equality legislation here.

Mr Speaker: Minister, before I call Mr McCarthy to ask a supplementary question, we were informed that you were going to answer questions 5 and 11 together.

The deputy First Minister: That is news to me.

Mr McCarthy: Given the horrendous delay by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in making progress on the single equality Bill — which was the subject of my original question — is it not abundantly clear to any observer that the Bill has, in effect, been abandoned by that Department?

The deputy First Minister: We will continue to keep the broad spectrum of equality legislation under review. Our Department is committed to the principle of equality for all people here. Policy proposals on equality legislation will be considered in consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive. It would not be appropriate to comment on timescales until policy decisions have been taken.

Our officials continue to assess the situation and keep us informed of developments in Britain and Europe on proposals for equality legislation. Work on equality legislation continues in order to deliver on our Programme for Government commitments, EU obligations, case law requirements and emerging issues. It is a mistake to say that all possible avenues have been closed down by the Executive — they clearly have not.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his reply. Is this not another example of Sinn Féin's surrendering of a vital political issue, this time on equality legislation, to the whims and fancies of the DUP, in the same way that it did on the Irish-language Act, the Maze and education?

The deputy First Minister: That is wishful thinking on the Member's part. The reality is that we are part of a coalition Government. If a member of the SDLP were the deputy First Minister, he or she would have to deal with the same issues and difficulties that I do. Clearly, it is quite easy for one to seize on issues if one wants to score political points and be involved in one-upmanship. However, that does not work for the simple reason that we — and I speak as a member of Sinn Féin and as the deputy First Minister — have accomplished something that the SDLP failed to do, which was to bring about a fully inclusive Executive. [Laughter.]

The SDLP, and its two deputy First Ministers, never managed to bring about a situation in which all parties sat at the Executive table, but Sinn Féin did, and that is important. Of course, the Democratic Unionist Party, the First Minister and I have said that being in Government together is not easy. It is difficult. However, the political situation in the North of Ireland has been transformed by the decisions —

Mrs D Kelly: Paralysis.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: The situation has been transformed as a result of the decisions that both the DUP and Sinn Féin have taken. The SDLP finds that hard to take, because it told everyone, prior to the restoration of the institutions, that there would never be an agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Mr A Maginness: Never.

The deputy First Minister: That is absolutely true. The Member can shake his head for as long as he likes, but it is on public record that the SDLP told the world and his mother that the DUP and Sinn Féin would never come to an agreement. That party was, therefore, confounded when we did.

A Cheann Comhairle, the next toot from the SDLP was that, although we had managed to get the institutions up and running, it would never last. Through our recent efforts and work, we have clearly shown that the process is sustainable, that it is lasting, and that it has produced results in the interests of all of the people that we represent. That does not mean to say that we agree on everything; there are issues on the agenda that remain to be resolved. However, rather than giving up, Sinn Féin works day and daily. Members of the SDLP can heckle, mutter and moan as much as they like on the sidelines, because the reality is that Sinn Féin and the DUP accomplished something that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists failed to do.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. When some parties do not get their own way, they try to butt in, shout and heckle; however, that gets them nowhere.

Will the Minister outline the main pieces of equality legislation that have been enacted since the restoration of the institutions?

The deputy First Minister: Since May 2007, our Department has made seven pieces of equality legislation: the Disability Discrimination (Premises) Regulations 2007; the Disability Discrimination (Service Providers and Public Authorities Carrying Out Functions) Regulations 2007; the Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations 2008;

the Disabilities Discrimination (Questions and Replies) Order 2007; the Disability Discrimination (Guidance on the Definition of Disability) (Appointed Day) Order 2008; the Sex Discrimination Order 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2008; and the Sex Discrimination (Amendment of Legislation) Regulations 2008.

In addition, we launched a consultation on the draft Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations in December 2008. That consultation will run until 13 March.

2.45 pm

Mr Burnside: I hate to intervene in the nationalist/republican debate. *[Laughter.]*

With the depth and extent of the equality and human-rights legislation that exists in Northern Ireland, is there no time in the future that the deputy First Minister envisages this Assembly evolving into the same formation of a Government and Executive as every other democratic country in the world, whether that be a voluntary coalition or a weighted majority?

The deputy First Minister: It is quite clear that the Member wishes to draw me into a revision of the speech that I made during the course of last weekend. Clearly, the answer is no. We have to work with the institutions and the agreements that have been made over the course of recent times. Those have been hugely beneficial to all of the people whom we represent. As a result of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement, we clearly have a responsibility — as an Executive and as an Assembly — to continue to work those institutions.

The future is unquantifiable for all of us. Over the course of recent times, people have failed to predict the future as regards the economic situation. People are now trying to predict what will happen economically over the course of the next while. From our perspective, we want to work the institutions that currently exist. The people who hanker after changes to the situation surely know that change can only come about as a result of agreements that are forged among the main parties that receive mandates from the electorate.

Fuel Poverty

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on what date the Minister for Social Development made it aware that her Department did not have legislative authority to make payments from her proposed fuel poverty package. (AQO 2111/09)

The deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business or to divulge the content of correspondence among Ministers of the

Executive. However, the Member will be aware that the First Minister and I were required to respond on this matter during the passage of the Financial Assistance Bill. Our responses are available in the record of those debates, and we have nothing further to add.

Rather than seeking to revive an old argument, it would be better to focus on the positive developments since then. The Financial Assistance Act 2009 is now law, and the Executive have approved our proposal for the first determination and designation under its provisions. We made that determination and designation on 17 February, and it will enable the Minister for Social Development to introduce a scheme for financial assistance in respect of fuel payments. We expect that that will be discussed and agreed at the Executive meeting this coming Thursday.

Mrs M Bradley: I am disappointed that the Minister cannot properly answer the question. I take it that what was said in the House on 13 January was wrong.

The deputy First Minister: I disagree with the Member.

Mr K Robinson: I listened carefully to the deputy First Minister's response. Will he indicate whether OFMDFM has any plans to expand the power, legislative authority and policy remits that are under its control during the next session of this Assembly?

The deputy First Minister: That question clearly flows from the debate that we had in the House about the contents of the Financial Assistance Bill. During the course of countless contributions, the First Minister and I made it absolutely clear that the Bill had a specific purpose. All sorts of expletives were used, particularly by SDLP members, to describe how dangerous the Bill was.

The First Minister and I did not cook up any plan whatsoever to use the Financial Assistance Bill for anything other than the purposes that we explained to this House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell the House when the payments for those living in fuel poverty will be made?

The deputy First Minister: As the necessary legislation has now passed through the Assembly, the Executive will discuss the scheme on Thursday. We are committed to making the payments as soon as possible after the regulations setting out the scheme come into operation.

North/South Ministerial Council: Single-Issue Meeting

7. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to

seek a single-issue meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to discuss the economic challenges on the island of Ireland. (AQO 2112/09)

The deputy First Minister: The economic crisis affects the entire island of Ireland and, indeed, the world. It was discussed in detail with the Taoiseach and Irish Government Ministers at a plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on 23 January 2009, and at a meeting of the British-Irish Council in Cardiff on Friday 20 February 2009.

Members will be aware of the high level of daily cross-border economic activity on the island. It is therefore essential to address the current economic challenges. The North/South Ministerial Council website www.borderpeople.info is the central access point for all cross-border mobility information on the island of Ireland.

Working groups that were set up by the North/South Ministerial Council are examining in detail the issues of cross-border banking and the transfer of public-sector pensions. Over the coming months, sectoral meetings will provide further opportunities for the relevant Ministers to discuss how the North/South Ministerial Council's work can contribute to addressing the serious effects of the economic downturn.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Will he assure Members that the particular difficulties being experienced by the construction industry and in the engineering and manufacturing sectors will be discussed and that the two Governments on this island will engage in joined-up working to address those problems at future meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council?

The deputy First Minister: At the meetings in Derry and Cardiff, we had broad discussions on the economic difficulties facing many Governments in this part of the world, not least the crisis in the construction industry, which exercises and concerns everyone.

The merits of the private sector versus the public sector have been debated for many years. I have made it clear that the size of the public sector has assisted the North, where unemployment currently stands at about 5%. That figure is too high, and it is unacceptable to OFMDFM, but the unemployment figure in the South is approaching 10%. As I told the House in the past week or so, when the First Minister and I were in Brussels, senior officials told us that they feared that the level of unemployment in Spain, for example, could reach 20% by the end of the year.

That illustrates the extent of the crisis that we face. It is incumbent on everyone, through the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council, to

ensure that, during our deliberations and at the cross-sectoral meetings, we address how we can work together to mutual benefit to combat the worst effects of the extremely serious worldwide economic downturn.

Mr Kennedy: Will the deputy First Minister tell the House when he and the First Minister are next scheduled to meet the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to address the economic challenges? Will he undertake to take that opportunity to raise the plight of the Presbyterian Mutual Society?

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I, together with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, will meet the Prime Minister in Downing Street next Wednesday, and we intend to raise the plight of investors in the Presbyterian Mutual Society on the margins of that meeting.

Mr Attwood: I thank the deputy First Minister for confirming that, despite my hope — and that of Mr McElduff — that a single-issue meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council would be held on economic challenges, no such meeting is planned. That is another example of Peter Robinson saying no and Sinn Féin saying OK.

I ask the deputy First Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Attwood: Can the deputy First Minister confirm that, until today, not only the First Minister and the DUP; not only the deputy First Minister and Sinn Féin, but the Alliance Party, have had prior sight of the Northern Ireland Bill, which deals with the devolution of justice, and which is being introduced today at Westminster? Will the deputy First Minister explain why he, Peter Robinson, and the Alliance Party should have that information?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have said on many occasions in the House that the supplementary question should relate to the original question. That supplementary question was in no way related to the substantive question. I will move on.

Expenditure Plans

8. **Mr Moutray** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what expenditure plans it has in relation to victims of the Troubles in the next financial year. (AQO 2113/09)

The deputy First Minister: A total of £36 million has been allocated to the sector over the three-year period 2008-2011, and £12 million is earmarked for the 2009-2010 financial year — an increase of approximately £4 million over this year's allocation. We hope to make an announcement on funding for victims and survivors soon.

Themes 1 and 2 of the European Union's Peace III programme are dedicated entirely to work with victims and survivors. Those themes have set aside €50 million over the period 2006-2013. Although Peace III has taken time to become established, projects totalling approximately €20 million have now been approved for funding the victims and survivors theme within the programme. As part of its initial work programme, the Commission for Victims and Survivors has undertaken to advise OFMDFM on spending priorities in the next financial year, and we look forward to receiving those views.

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Will he indicate what measures will be taken to ensure that the many victims who are not represented by victims' groups will be treated fairly in respect of funding?

The deputy First Minister: All of us absolutely sympathise with the substance of that question. There is a responsibility, and I think that we have the mechanisms and the organisational structures to deal with that.

All of us clearly understand the importance of ensuring that the strategy for victims and survivors brings benefits to everyone in society. The consultation on the draft strategic approach for victims and survivors closed on 31 October 2008. The Committee for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister has discussed the responses to the consultation paper with officials, and I understand that, given the relationship between the strategy and the service, the Committee is currently awaiting a copy of the draft consultation paper on the victims and survivors' service, which was proposed in the draft strategy, before making any response on the strategy itself.

We look forward to hearing comments from the Committee, which will no doubt encompass the question that was asked, in the foreseeable future.

Mr O'Loan: Will the deputy First Minister explain whether the work programme for the victims' commissioners has been signed off and agreed between himself and the First Minister — and if not, why not?

The deputy First Minister: Although the commission's work programme has been approved by the First Minister and myself, our approval of the programme is a fundamental part of our accountability relationship with the commission — in particular, the budgetary dimension. We are now satisfied with that aspect, and have approved the draft work programme.

The commission has recently appointed a secretary. That is a key appointment that will accelerate many procedural matters for the commission, and I have no doubt that the Member will be disappointed that I was able to give him an answer that involved an agreement between the First Minister and myself. His party has

been very critical in its comments on the actions of the First Minister, given that it attempted to form an alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party against Sinn Féin last year, at a time when its Minister was sandwiched between two leading Members of both of those parties. That was not that party's position just a few short weeks ago.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions must relate to the original question. If a Member rises, knowing quite well that his or her supplementary question does not relate to the original question, it will be a long time before he or she will catch my eye again for a supplementary question.

Redundancies in Upper Bann

1. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department has responded to recent redundancies in Upper Bann. (AQO 2126/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has provided information and advice to people who have been made redundant in Upper Bann in order that they might find alternative employment, or identify opportunities to retrain under the Department's employment training or further education programmes.

In several cases, local jobs and benefits offices were able to deliver on-site clinics directly to those who had received notice of redundancy, including those employed by Moy Park, Huhtamaki, Seagoe Technologies, R A Irwin and Company, Ulster Weavers, NACCO Materials Handling Group, and Woolworths in Banbridge. Further clinics have been arranged for NACCO Materials Handling Group and Henry Denny and Sons.

Mr Savage: Does the Minister agree that priority must be given to training — especially in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge — that would be likely to promote inward investment and new business start-ups?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Recently, I visited the Banbridge jobs and benefits office, and I saw for myself the situation for unemployed people. Sadly, very few vacancies were available.

The Member is correct, and all indicators and commentators point to the same thing; we must train people now for the anticipated upturn, whenever it comes. For many companies, that is easy to say but difficult to deliver, because they are attempting to

conserve cash flow, and training, maintenance and marketing are the sort of expenditures that get cut back. We are urging companies to talk to us about those things in order to discover what we can do to help them, what the colleges can do, and what other arrangements can be made, particularly for apprentices, who are suffering job losses as a result of the current cutbacks.

Mr Simpson: The Minister has outlined the position with respect to further education colleges and apprenticeships. In the Upper Bann constituency, approximately 400 jobs have been lost, and I understand from phone calls today that more announcements will be made shortly, all of which is a sad reflection of the economic situation. Will the Minister outline further the help that his Department can give to companies with respect to apprenticeships?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We have been looking closely at the subject of apprenticeships. Indeed, there is a question further down the list that refers directly to this subject. We are continuously reviewing the help that we offer. The situation is not static, and actions that were appropriate in October may not be appropriate today. Therefore, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), my Department and others must respond as flexibly as possible.

The picture is improving for apprentices, in so far as they now have several options. We have offered help in several areas, including the motor industry and the construction industry, in which we were losing significant numbers of apprenticeships. We are preparing to extend the range of apprentice categories. Although we began by addressing the areas that are suffering the greatest losses, they are not necessarily the only ones in which we will act. If a case can be made for extending the special arrangements for apprentices to other industries and sectors, I am prepared to consider it.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister agree to review the practice whereby apprentices, particularly in the construction industry, who are undertaking a one-day-a-week course and have now been paid off must choose between claiming jobseeker's allowance and remaining on their course?

If an apprentice applies for benefit allowance, he or she has to resign from his or her course. At this time of the year, some of them are two or three years into their courses. Will the Minister, therefore, review the students' status and entitlement to benefits and courses?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is a menu of options from which individuals can choose, depending on their age and circumstances. Individuals who are prepared to join Training for Success can go into an assimilated work environment; some take up full-time college courses; some are still

in outplacements; and some, depending on age, are still in receipt of benefits.

I will be happy to look at any particular case of which the Member is aware. Our objective is to ensure that apprentices do not lose out if they have put work into an apprenticeship. We do not want them to have done two years' work for nothing. If Members find that apprentices are struggling and that cases are emerging in which people are losing out, I will be happy to look at them.

Interpoint: University Site

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a timescale for the development of the university site at Interpoint.

(AQO 2127/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Recently, the University of Ulster announced proposals to relocate some course provision from its Jordanstown site to a redeveloped Belfast campus. I appreciate that the university has announced proposals for major capital investment as part of its redevelopment plans. Some of that will require public funding that has not yet been agreed with my Department, which is considering the economic appraisal.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am disappointed that such an important facility is moving out of East Antrim, but it is still an important campus site for the area. Can the Minister assure me that the university will continue to develop its centre of sporting excellence, along with other facilities?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In mid-November, I received a proposal from the University of Ulster. The university has a master plan, but we received only the part that refers to the Jordanstown campus. I have not received any proposals in respect of the remaining University of Ulster campuses. Consequently, there is a process of ensuring that the proposals that we received match green book standards. Following completion of that process, the proposals will be sent to the Department of Finance and Personnel for consideration. If that Department is satisfied, the matter will come back to my Department for a policy appraisal. However, that has not yet happened.

I understand that the Jordanstown campus is to continue along the lines that the Member mentioned, but that has not been finalised. The process is in its early stages, and I am not in a position to be definitive about where it will take us. The Department will be in a better position to make a judgement when it receives the entire master plan and is able to see the overall picture.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister clarify whether he has had any discussions or consultations in relation to the development at the Interpoint building? How does he feel about the recent media articles on the proposals? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I said in my response to the Member for East Antrim Mr Neeson, there was a media announcement, but I have received only the part of the plan that is relevant to the Jordanstown campus. I have not received the complete master plan that covers all the campuses of the University of Ulster. We will assess that master plan on receipt of it.

We will also have to establish what the capital availability will be, because, at present, we can consider the plan only in respect of the current comprehensive spending review period. Work arising from the master plan will go on for over 20 years, so I have not yet been able to satisfy myself that we have funding to deal with it. However, we are taking the issue seriously. There will be a meeting with senior officials from the University of Ulster later this week, which will enable us to come to terms with the proposals. The Department will give those proposals a high priority.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the proposed move of a significant number of faculties from the Jordanstown site by the University of Ulster will constitute the loss of a neutral site and impact in a detrimental manner on the overall third-level education package provided in East Antrim? Does he also agree that the proposed move could have a damaging impact on the critical research and development potential of the university and the high-tech firms in East Antrim?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

There is no doubt that moving a significant number of faculties from East Antrim to another site could create issues for local companies. However, I hope that if the proposals are agreed, the university would put in place mechanisms to ensure that no companies in Northern Ireland or in the environments of its campuses are disadvantaged, as that would not be in the interest of the companies or the university. That is one of the issues that we will have to address when appraising the plans. I cannot pre-empt that process. We must work through the issues with the university, and that process has not happened yet.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his replies. Is there not a fundamental contradiction between the University of Ulster proposing to move many of its courses and students from Jordanstown to Belfast and its decision to pull out of Springvale?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The proposal is in the gift of the University of Ulster; it is the university's proposal. We have received one

proposal in respect of the Belfast campus, but we have not received the total master-planning exercise. It is fair to say that Springvale did not work out as had been hoped. The Department is conscious of that, and we must be careful that we do not see any repeat performances. The issue was extremely sensitive, and many people in west Belfast were disappointed that that project did not go ahead. However, we are past that point, and all I can say is that we will be looking at the proposals when we receive them all. I have no doubt that the proposals will be discussed with the Committee for Employment and Learning before any decisions are taken.

Apprentices

3. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his Department's monitoring exercise on apprentices who have been made redundant, and their current training provisions.

(AQO 2128/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department introduced contingency arrangements to allow apprentices who were made redundant from the construction, engineering and motor-vehicle sectors to continue with training, because those were the sectors most affected by the economic downturn. The Department is also examining data on other sectors, and as I said to a Member previously, it will introduce similar arrangements if that is shown to be necessary. Three hundred and three apprentices were made redundant from those priority-skill areas: 205 in construction, 78 in engineering, and 20 in the motor-vehicle sector.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will the Minister comment on the suggestion that was put to the Committee for Employment and Learning that given the downturn, contractors that have been awarded capital projects should be required to take on a certain number of apprentices?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Several Members raised that issue. I have been in touch with the Minister of Finance and Personnel with regard to that because the Central Procurement Directorate is under his Department's control, and he is very sympathetic. I believe that such conditions can be applied to contracts already, although I may be corrected if I am wrong. I am not sure at what point that compliance has commenced, and I am happy to write to the Member to confirm those details, but my understanding is that the Department of Finance and Personnel is agreeable to that process.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. The Minister said that 205 apprentices in the construction industry had lost their jobs.

I am concerned about those who have completed two years of their apprenticeships and who may find themselves with no opportunity to conclude them. All apprentices are important, but what help can the Minister give to those particular apprentices?

3.15 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As the Member points out, those key people are the focus of our attention, and I will give him some details on what has happened to the 303 apprentices who have, so far, been made redundant: 157 have been referred to the Careers Service for advice and further training, they are still being processed and have not been allocated an alternative; 51 are continuing their training under Training for Success, which may mean that they are working in a simulated work environment in a college; 26 are continuing their training under Steps to Work, which means that they have placements with employers for one day a week and come into college for four days a week; 43 have found alternative employment, including continued apprenticeship training or a return to their previous employer; 16 have entered further education; and the remaining 10 apprentices have not maintained contact with the training supplier.

A number of apprentices have been dealt with to their satisfaction, quite a few have found alternative employment, and we are still processing 157 out of the aforementioned 303.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am interested in the geographical distribution of apprentices in the construction and engineering sectors. Will the Minister provide more information on where those apprentices are located? Will he also tell the House about the fostering programme?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Dealing with the latter point, Michelin, Northern Ireland Water, Phoenix Gas and Dale Farm have, so far, agreed to offer a fostering service, which happens when we cannot place the apprentices in any other scheme.

I do not have any information on the geographical distribution to hand, but I am happy to write to the Member with more details.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Jobs and Benefits Offices: Staffing

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to review staffing levels in the Jobs and Benefits Offices.

(AQO 2130/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has already increased the front line resources available in the jobs and benefits offices through increasing the hours of part-time staff, implementing

overtime, and recruiting temporary and permanent staff. At this stage, I have committed to recruiting up to 130 additional front line staff to meet the needs of the rising number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits. I will continue to review staffing requirements.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister confirm that the current review of the Social Security Agency, and the handling arrangements for the proposal to remove some staff to other district offices, is a matter for the Department for Social Development? Will he continue to ensure the dispersal of his staff in the various offices, such as those in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, so that a service can be ensured?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am aware that a major reorganisation is going on in the Social Security Agency, and my Department shares 25 offices with it. As the Member said, that is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Social Development. Nevertheless, DEL staff are not moving from any of the offices that are on its books. Regrettably, due to present circumstances, it is likely that we will be increasing the number of staff in those offices over the coming months. However, we have no plans to move staff from any of the existing offices.

Mr Wells: The Minister will be aware that there is huge concern throughout the community regarding the review of staffing in social security offices. I accept that that does not fall within his bailiwick. Nevertheless, because there is an overlap in 25 offices, it does concern his Department. Has he met the Minister for Social Development to discuss that issue and to express his concerns about the proposals?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes. Senior officials are in constant communication on the matter because it involves issues about premises.

For example, staff from the Social Security Agency might work on the upper floor of an office, while DEL staff work on the lower floor. If they leave, are we left to pay the bills for the entire office? The consultation with staff is ongoing, and I have visited a number of offices recently, including some in the Member's constituency. I recently visited the Social Security Agency office in Kilkeel. Indeed, a couple of MLAs brought a significant delegation of staff to the Building, many of whom are based in Kilkeel, and they told me about their concerns that they might be moved to Newtownards. I have written to the Minister for Social Development on that matter, and I am aware of the problem that the Member has raised.

As I said, it is a matter for the Social Security Agency. I have also received a letter from Banbridge District Council inviting me and the Minister for Social Development to appear before it to discuss the issue. We are not moving any of our staff out of any

offices, and the offices will continue to operate with DEL staff in them. However, we must have help from the Social Security Agency; when people enter an office, the first person whom they deal with is a staff member from the Social Security Agency. Therefore, we must work together very closely. We are doing so, but the back-office facilities are entirely a matter for the Minister for Social Development.

A consultation is ongoing, and many of the concerns that I have heard — which are similar to those that the Member has heard — are being referred to the Department for Social Development. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development will deal with them in due course.

Jobs and Benefits Offices: Flexibility

6. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to review the flexibility that staff in the jobs and benefits offices have when dealing with clients.

(AQO 2131/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department is reviewing, on an ongoing basis, operational matters in jobs and benefits offices and job centres in response to demands arising from the economic downturn. That internal review is separate from the Department for Social Development's strategic business review, to which I have just referred. Personal advisers already have the flexibility to alter the frequency of some interviews. Further discretion on the frequency and duration of interviews is being introduced.

Along with the Social Security Agency, the Department is implementing rapid reclaim arrangements for clients. Through the Steps to Work programme, personal advisers have the flexibility to agree a tailored range of provision for anyone who is unemployed or economically inactive, based on the needs of the individual.

To provide our personal advisers with the necessary skills, we have developed an adviser core skills training programme based on our training for Pathways to Work personal advisers, which won an award in this year's national training awards.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. Will he confirm whether the Pathways to Work programme has been successful in encouraging many people to get off benefits and into work?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I can confirm that. For Members' benefit, the Pathways to Work programme is aimed at the former incapacity benefit claimant count, of which there are about 113,000 in Northern Ireland. The last time that I

looked at the figures, approximately 3,000 people had been brought off that list and into work.

However, the Member will be aware that, in the current economic circumstances, it is extremely difficult to find the opportunities that were once available; things are much more difficult now. The interesting point about the programme is that it involves staff training that is much more intensive than the previous training. It involves six interviews with each client, on a compulsory basis for those who were applying for incapacity benefit at the time, and on a voluntary basis for those who were already on it.

The programme has been successful in getting people in both categories back to work, but the fact remains that since the programme was envisaged a number of years ago, and implemented throughout Northern Ireland last year, circumstances have radically changed. It is true to say that it is becoming an uphill struggle. Nevertheless, the principle is a good one, and I strongly commend the staff for the efforts that they are making.

Review of Student Fees

7. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on progress on the review of student fees. (AQO 2132/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The review of variable fees and student finance arrangements is under way.

Northern Ireland is the first region in the UK where variable fees apply, and a review of those arrangements has commenced. An independent research project is considering existing data sources to provide sound evidence for the review. A stakeholder steering group has been established, chaired independently by Joanne Stuart. On 11 February 2009, she briefed the Committee for Employment and Learning on progress. I anticipate that an interim report will be produced for consideration in May. I will bring that report before the Committee prior to it going out for public consultation, which is scheduled for autumn 2009. The final report is expected early in 2010.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his reply. Now that we are ahead of the rest of the UK, what impact will that have on students from Northern Ireland who are studying in other parts of the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It does not have any impact at this stage, but, clearly, it is one of the factors that must be taken into account. As Members know, there are a variety of mechanisms for dealing with fees in the United Kingdom. Scotland has its own system, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills announced a review of its

policy. It made announcements in the summer of 2007, without consulting us, and it set targets for itself. However, it has had to retract those targets, because it felt that they were unachievable. Therefore, there is a danger that those different reviews will get out of kilter, causing imbalances throughout the United Kingdom.

As the review has started and stakeholders are now taking evidence — and they will be addressed by the Committee and others — it is important that we take into account the current situation and the impact that it will have. The early signs are encouraging in so far as student numbers appear to be on the up, including for the current year, but the impact that current circumstances will have on that remains to be seen.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister ensure that the review is completely independent? Why will an interim report be published in May? The Minister has already told the House that we would have to wait until there are figures for three years. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The review is independent. As I said, it is chaired by Joanne Stuart, who is the chairman of the Institute of Directors. That stakeholder group includes students, financial advisers to students, as well as representatives from education and library boards, colleges and universities. Therefore, a broad spectrum of people is represented on the group. No one has criticised or complained about the number of people on it, or about their independence.

I have asked for an interim report in May, but that is all that it will be. Two years' data has already been gathered, and a third year's data will be available in January 2010. A fellow on the review team is working on the analysis of that data. However, if any proposals were to emerge from the review, which would require further public assistance, the Department of Finance and Personnel would insist on a very rigorous database, and I am advised that that requires at least three years' figures to draw any significant conclusions. Therefore, we will have the figure for the third year by January 2010.

Mr Newton: The Minister will remember that he pleaded with the House in December 2007, for the sake of a year, to be allowed to carry out the review. He will also remember that on his last visit to the House, when I asked him when the final report might be available, he was unable to give a date. The Minister is now indicating that the report will be available early in 2010. However, when Joanne Stuart — to whom the Minister has referred — appeared before the Committee on 11 February and was asked when the report would be made available, she said she could not give a date for the report at that point.

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question?

Mr Newton: Will the Minister confirm when the report will be available?

3.30 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I cannot confirm a date, because I am not in control of that; it is a matter for the independent review. I offer estimates when Members ask when the report is likely to appear. The Member has asked me that on a number of occasions. I have not tied the Committee to a particular date. As the Member knows, when reports come in, they must be assessed by the Department, and the Committee will want to look at it.

I have indicated to the Member that I will apprise the Committee quarterly on how things are going and that I expect to receive an interim report, probably in May 2009. That is at an early stage, and it will be published just under a year ahead of the final report. It all depends on the analysis, but I offer an indicative timetable. Throughout the process, I have said that it would commence in the academic year 2008-09, and that exactly is what has happened.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Procurement Task Group

1. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work of the Procurement Task Group. (AQO 2146/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I announced the establishment of the construction industry forum procurement task group in my statement to the Assembly on 15 December 2008. The group held its inaugural meeting on 17 December 2008. It has met on three further occasions, and it will continue to meet at two-weekly intervals until the end of March 2009.

A key role of the task group is to monitor and report progress on projects that are scheduled to go to the marketplace this financial year. Departments have indicated that more than 60 projects, with an aggregated value in excess of £400 million, are to be advertised before the end of this financial year or are already at various stages in the procurement process.

In addition, Roads Service has already commenced procurement of the new A5 western transport corridor, which runs from Aghnacloy to Londonderry, and which has an estimated contract value of £600 million. As an interim measure, ahead of the formal launch of the investment strategy website, the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) has, on behalf of Departments, provided the construction industry representatives at

the task group with a significant amount of information on project progress.

Mr Weir: How will the construction industry be kept up to date on the progress made in rolling out those projects that are scheduled to come onto the market before the end of this financial year and in forthcoming financial years?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises an important point. Part of the thinking behind the establishment of the procurement task group was to ensure close liaison between Government and the construction industry in the private sector. The construction industry forum is recognised as the appropriate and established forum for the industry to discuss with Departments and Government the roll-out of investment strategy projects. The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and the Central Procurement Directorate have established a delivery-tracking system for major investment strategy projects.

It is also intended that the investment strategy website, which will be launched, will be of great benefit to the construction industry. Ahead of the launch of that website, as an interim measure, Departments have, through the CPD, provided the construction industry with a significant amount of information about projects that are scheduled to go to the marketplace this financial year.

Mr P Maskey: Can the Minister tell us how the procurement task group will promote and access good social impacts when contracts and work are undertaken in communities, especially those in social need? Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question: the issue has been raised on a number of occasions. As I have said, the task group has had a number of meetings already and will meet fortnightly. Its terms of reference, or principles, include not only delivering best value for money, taking account of the needs of the local construction industry and keeping bidding cost low, but delivering sustainable development. It is important that that is taken into account with respect to the issues the Member has raised. The task group will take account of it in its deliberations.

As I have said to the House on several occasions, it is essential that we ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises — which are the vast majority of Northern Ireland businesses — have the opportunity to bid for projects and can compete properly for investment from the investment strategy.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister made any progress on making Government contracts more accessible to smaller local companies? When does he envisage acting on that?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I said to the House previously, the vast majority of projects — indeed all of them if they are categorised as being accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — are already going to small and medium-sized enterprises, because the vast majority of companies in Northern Ireland fall within that category. I assure the Member that that is happening now; we must ensure that it continues.

Government clients are required to publicly advertise all construction procurement opportunities estimated to exceed £30,000 for construction works, and £5,000 for construction related services. As I explained to the House before, centres of procurement expertise encourage SMEs to join together as consortia and bid for contracts, or look for opportunities within the supply chains that will be formed by a successful tenderer. The task group is developing proposals for promoting equality and sustainable development through sustainable procurement in construction. All that should reassure the Member that the issue he raised is being very strongly addressed as a result of the work that we are carrying out.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that processes have been put in place to improve the procurement procedure and ensure good practice, will he tell me why there are such long delays in the procurement of major projects in the education and health sectors?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We are keen to ensure that the process of working through procurement is speeded up as quickly as possible. That is why I announced in my statement to the Assembly in December in relation to the Department of Education and some of the legal challenges to the frameworks that those projects would be taken forward outside the framework; in other words, that there would not be a delay to that. People want to see capital investment speeded up, and the decision to work outside the framework was deliberately and specifically made to ensure that there would not be any delay, or any further delay, to those projects getting started and to work being done under them.

The total value of that work, following the removal of the framework and proceeding on a project-by-project basis through normal procurement methods, will be approximately £115 million this year. Between December and March, a further £400 million will be taken forward into the marketplace through procurement projects. That brings the total investment — whether it be in education, health, roads, housing, and so on — to over £1.3 billion or £1.4 billion net this year; a considerable advance and increase on the previous year, and on previous years under direct rule.

Efficiency Targets

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress is being made by Departments in achieving their efficiency targets. (AQO 2147/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As part of the 2007 Budget process, the Executive unanimously agreed that Northern Ireland Departments would be set a target of delivering 3% per annum in cash-releasing efficiency savings over the years 2008-09 to 2010-11. That was in the context of the slowdown in public expenditure growth at the United Kingdom level, as planned for in the national comprehensive spending review.

In order to ensure that sufficient funding is available to priority front-line services for the people of Northern Ireland, the efficiency savings programme will release £1.6 billion in resources over the Budget period to be recycled back into departmental budgets. Primary responsibility for the planning and the delivery of efficiency savings lies within each Department with each individual Minister. The Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) role is to monitor progress. The latest assessment by officials is that although good progress has been made in meeting the 3% target, there is concern at the delay in publishing efficiency delivery plans and about the level of detail provided in some cases.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his reply; however, I want to hear from him further. In his pre-Budget report, the Chancellor announced plans for further cuts in 2010-11 of approximately £5 billion. I would like to hear the Minister's assessment of how that will impact on Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question, because he raises an important issue, which I flagged up in last week's debates. Discussion on that took place with the Scottish and Welsh Governments and others at the British-Irish Council meeting in Cardiff last Friday. The issue affects all Whitehall Departments, but it also affects all of the devolved Administrations because it is, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer has indicated, a UK-wide efficiency-savings target.

Of course, he describes them as efficiency savings, but the difference, I think, is this: true efficiency savings release money to be recycled and put back into budgets; what we appear to be hearing from the Chancellor of the Exchequer are so-called efficiency savings that will not be recycled back into spending plans. That is a very serious situation. That is an issue on which, as I have indicated, we will fight with regard to its impact on Northern Ireland. The Assembly and the Executive were given a settlement under the comprehensive spending review of 2007, and it is

completely wrong and unjust that that level of funding should be reduced at this time.

As I have already flagged up, that is a serious issue, because there is a clamour in Whitehall, by not just the Government but by the Opposition as well, as to which of them can cut deeper with so-called efficiencies and when that should happen, and not in just 2010-11. Indeed, the Opposition at Westminster has said that the cuts should happen from this April. One can imagine the impact that such cuts would have on the Budget of Northern Ireland without any preparation or time even to plan for that. Therefore, the situation is serious, and we are actively resisting it, along with the devolved Administrations of Scotland and Wales.

Mr O'Loan: At the time of the last report, the only Department that had failed to submit its efficiency plan was the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Did the Minister seek an explanation for that failure? If so, what was that explanation, and has that efficiency plan yet been produced?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In my answer, I drew attention to the delay in publishing efficiency delivery plans and to the level of detail. Further work will be required by Departments to provide assurance to the Assembly and to the wider public that those efficiency savings are being made, because it must be remembered that the money is already allocated in budgets.

The Member mentioned OFMDFM. It should also be mentioned that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published its efficiency delivery programme at only the start of October, and the Department of Education published only a summary at the start of November. Four Departments — the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of Education, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development — have published only summaries of their plans. Therefore, this is an issue in which all of those Departments are required to come forward with more transparency and more detail on those matters. I thank the Member for raising the issue, and he may wish to have a word with his ministerial party colleague on that issue.

Dr Farry: In light of the comments that have been made from all quarters of the House — including those from members of the Minister's party — and the inability of some Ministers to make proper efficiency savings rather than cuts, does the Minister feel that lessons are to be learned at an Executive level about giving guidance to Departments about what is meant by efficiency savings?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises a good point, because each Minister on the Executive agreed to the 3% efficiency targets

overall and in their own Departments. Therefore, in developing those plans, it is essential that the impact on front line services is minimised, because the whole purpose of the efficiency savings is to maintain front line services and to reduce costs in the system so that the front line services can still be delivered, but more efficiently. Therefore, it is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that Assembly Members and Committees will, no doubt, be seeking clear guidance and information from Ministers that the efficiency cuts — to which Ministers agreed — are implemented without the crude approach of cutting front line services, which is not the real purpose of efficiency savings.

Obviously, the Assembly had a debate on the matter earlier which highlighted some of those issues. I hope that that will be productive.

3.45 pm

Treasury Financial Reporting Manual

3. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the reasons why current regulations, as set out in the Treasury Financial Reporting Manual, could not be changed, even on a temporary basis, to facilitate a proposal by the Quarry Products Association Northern Ireland to offset job losses.

(AQO 2148/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The rules are in place to ensure that Departments are open and accountable to the Assembly and the taxpayer about how money is spent. One key principle in preserving that transparency is to match reporting of expenditure with the year in which the activity took place. To change the rules in order to manipulate the timing of public expenditure, even with the best of intentions, is not only wrong but, in fact, contrary to statute and therefore illegal. It would, undoubtedly, result in criticism from the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for that answer. I recognise that he has given much careful consideration to this proposition and others in order to enable the Executive to come forward with initiatives to help to tackle the economic downturn.

Although I recognise that this proposition perhaps came too late in the financial year to permit the Minister to respond in the way in which he might otherwise have wished to do so, it was novel because that local industry offered to do work in the here and now, as it were, but apply for payment in the year in which payments were scheduled initially under the Budget arrangements.

Will the Minister consider whether that action might be deemed worthwhile by the other regional Assemblies, so that a co-ordinated approach could be

taken to urge the Prime Minister to determine whether accrual regulations and statutory obligations could be relaxed or changed in order to permit that to happen? Its benefit would be that a hole would not be created in future Budget years.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for his comments. On 22 January, I met Gordon Best and his group. We had a fairly thorough discussion on the matter. I must say that, as a layman, I am entirely sympathetic.

As the Member said, that part of the construction industry has turned its attention to how it can get things done and try to solve problems. I understand where it comes from, sympathise with it and applaud it for looking at innovative ways to try to deal with those problems. Unfortunately, its proposal is prevented by the reasons that I have outlined — not least of which is that it is enshrined in statute in the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, which requires Departments and public bodies to prepare accounts in accordance with United Kingdom accounting standards. Indeed, the Treasury follows the same accounting conventions.

Therefore, there are practical, legal and other difficulties in doing what the Quarry Products Association has asked. To take that approach to change would present big difficulties, not least because it would change the entire way in which accounting is done at central level by the Treasury. However, that does not deter me from looking at ways in which a case for that could be advanced.

I met the Quarry Products Association to discuss other ways to try to ensure that there is some certainty about money coming forward. I have liaised with the Department for Regional Development on issues that could help the industry in the new financial year. I am always open to new and novel ideas. If there is a way to make them work for the good of people of Northern Ireland and to create construction jobs, I am willing to listen to them.

Mr McNarry: Obviously, the question resonates with road contractors and, I suspect, with many others. I appreciate the Minister's genuine sympathy in the circumstances in which he finds himself. However, I support the Finance Committee's Chairman in pressing this question.

Does the Minister agree that there is an anomaly here and that continuity in a contract is important, not least to prevent layoffs in the current circumstances? Can he move to set in place guidelines to offset such anomalies?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have much sympathy with the industry on the matter — in which all sections of the House have common cause.

Ultimately, we should not allow some accounting procedure to get in the way of rolling money out where we can.

It must be recognised that it is more than that in this case. There is a statutory and legal requirement, which is an impenetrable barrier. However, I fully accept where Members are coming from on this issue. If there is something that can be done to help people at a difficult time that is outwith a dry rule, we will take that action if at all possible. I explored the matter in considerable detail with officials, and I will undoubtedly return to it in discussions with the Treasury.

Mr Dallat: I have listened very carefully to the Minister. I understand the burdens of finance in the Assembly, and my idea is not new or novel. Does the Minister agree that there is a serious problem in how we handle roads maintenance, particularly at the end of the financial year when we depend on the whims of additional money?

Roads maintenance is not just about maintaining the roads; it concerns road safety and people's lives. Therefore, has the Minister given any thought to how a better system could evolve, rather than Roads Service having to rush around and spend money in March that it may not have been aware that it had?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I recognise the importance of investment in our road infrastructure. It is worth bearing in mind that the Budget settlement over this three-year period substantially increases capital investment in roads. There has been a 41.4% increase in capital investment in roads in 2008-09; £177 million has been invested in 2008-09 compared to the £103 million that was invested under direct rule in 2007-08. That is a massive increase in capital investment.

There has also been a substantial investment in roads maintenance, and it is essentially for the Minister for Regional Development to allocate the budget that he is given. I appreciate what the Member says about in-year allocations and so on, but there are always competing priorities. The Minister who is responsible for roads will argue that roads maintenance is a good way of giving work to the construction industry. However, there are also cries — from quarters with which Members are familiar — that money should be given to health, social housing and so on.

The Member will understand those pressures. He is putting forward the case for investment in roads, but other members of his party will probably disagree and say that housing is the priority, and others will say something different. I entirely understand the Member's view, but the level of investment that we are making indicates the importance that we place on this subject.

Statement of Rate Levy and Collection 2006-07

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action his Department has taken to implement the recommendations in the Public Accounts Committee Report on the Statement of Rate Levy and Collection 2006-07. (AQO 2149/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Many of the recommendations will be implemented through a full review of the financial aspects of the rate-collection IT system, which is making solid progress in Land and Property Services. That will result in a shadow accruals account being prepared for rate collection in 2008-09, although the cash statement of account will remain the principal account statement for this year.

System-validation controls are also being further reviewed, and appropriate targets for agency performance are being set in the 2009-2010 business-planning process. NI Direct now provides the first-line telephone contact for rate-collection activities in Land and Property Services, and plans are well advanced to ensure that there is sufficient capacity for calls after the 2009-2010 rates bill issue in early April. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has requested a quarterly update on progress, and the first of those will be provided at the end of April.

Mr Beggs: Local councils have been through a very difficult rates process recently, and, indeed, I declare an interest as a local councillor. There were huge fluctuations in the burdens placed on local councils due to inaccuracies or changes in the calculations of the penny product that were made by Land and Property Services (LPS). Will the Minister explain why, some two months after local councils advised of a considerable number of properties that were incorrectly listed as vacant, bills have not been issued and the penny product has not been adjusted accordingly?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Member. He and other Members have raised this matter previously. I have explained the situation to him, and he will no doubt welcome the progress that has been made in relation to vacancies. To date, just over 50,000 inspection forms have been returned by local councils, and there is now good co-operation between local councils and LPS. I think that everyone recognises the importance of that.

Of the 50,000 inspection forms that have been returned, 13,000 confirmed the property as vacant; 3,500 contained the full information that is necessary in order to issue a bill; 6,500 required follow-up action, such as valuation adjustment; and 27,000 required further information, such as the correct person to whom to send the bill, before a bill could be issued.

A massive number of inspections have been carried out. In most cases, further work is required before a bill can be issued. However, that essential work is progressing. The Member will be aware that vacant properties will be rateable in future anyway. Furthermore, he will be aware of the Department's announcement in early January on help to district councils and the freeze on the regional-rate element of the household rates bill. The help that we gave to councils will be, and has been, considerably helpful in minimising the arrears burden at council level across Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister outline what actions he has taken to improve the level of customer care in Land and Property Services, an area in which it has, unfortunately, been found wanting?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I agree that there have been clear cases of lapses, which must be recognised and addressed. For me, it is essential that the public enjoy a proper and good experience when they contact LPS or any part of Government. As I said in my answer, LPS now uses NI Direct for first-line telephone handling, and backlogs have been reduced substantially. Service levels must reach a point at which people who contact LPS through correspondence or by telephone have confidence and an assurance that they are dealing with a professional and competent organisation.

I am determined to ensure that ratepayers and the people of Northern Ireland have such an experience. It is simply not good enough that people continue to report problems or difficulties, and it is the Government's job to ensure that all Departments and agencies for which we are responsible are doing their jobs effectively and properly. Good improvements have been made. We know of the legacy issue about the amount of work that was transferred to LPS at the one time, but it is time for LPS to perform to the standard that customers, rightly, expect.

Mr Gallagher: I want to ask the Minister about the significant problem of rate arrears. Does he agree that there is room for improvement, particularly for individuals or property owners who have fallen well behind in their arrears? At the same time, people who pay their rates one day late are penalised by losing their discounts. Therefore, there seems to be inconsistency. Has any progress been made on addressing those problems?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issue of arrears has been raised many times in the House, and I agree with the Member's comments. Last year, the figure for rate arrears was approximately £124 million, and I am determined to tackle that issue and ensure that that figure is not repeated. It is essential that we bring that money in. It should be borne in mind that the effect on councils is realised only when any

arrears are eventually written off. In any business or Government there will be always be a certain amount that cannot be recovered. However, it is right and proper that rate arrears should be brought in as quickly as possible.

We must recognise that, because of the economic downturn and the difficulty that people are experiencing in paying household bills, LPS is finding it more difficult to recover rate arrears this year. I am sure that Members will have encountered some cases of hardship in their constituencies and in advice centres. We must recognise that, although we want to ensure that money that is owed to the Government is paid, some people are finding it more difficult to pay bills this year. As a result, we must be careful. That tension exists, but we must do everything possible to reduce the arrears bill.

Senior Civil Servants: Bonus Scheme

5. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the bonus scheme for senior civil servants. (AQO 2150/09)

4.00 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The bonus scheme for senior civil servants in the Northern Ireland Civil Service is based on the pay strategy across GB Departments. That in turn is informed by the independent annual report of the Senior Salaries Review Body, which makes recommendations on the total Senior Civil Service pay bill and, within that, what proportion of the pay bill should be paid as non-consolidated bonuses as opposed to consolidated pay rises.

In January 2009, Sir David Normington published a report commissioned by the Cabinet Office. I am analysing that report, along with my officials, and I intend to make further comment in due course.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Prison Service

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Prison Service to implement in full the recommendations made by the Prisoner Ombudsman in the report into the death of Colin Bell in Maghaberry Prison on 1 August 2008. — [*Mr McCartney.*]

Ms Anderson: The British Minister, Mr Goggins, said that the tragic death of Colin Bell will be a watershed for the North's Prison Service. He also said:

"I am determined that the Prison Service will instil a consistent culture of care for all prisoners, but especially those who pose a danger to themselves."

We cannot cherry-pick where the responsibility lies to instil a consistent culture of care for all prisoners. We have to shine a bright torch on all those who hold that kind of responsibility to bring about the systematic change that is needed. I move the motion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 51; Noes 35.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, 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 McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms J McCann and Mr McLaughlin.

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Mr Simpson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Prison Service to implement in full the recommendations made by the Prisoner Ombudsman in the report into the death of Colin Bell in Maghaberry Prison on 1 August 2008.

Adjourned at 4.13 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 24 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

The Late Mr James Leslie

Mr Speaker: It is my sad duty to inform the Assembly of the death of Mr James Leslie, a former Member for North Antrim. I take this opportunity to extend my personal condolences to his wife and family circle on their sad loss at this time.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: When the sad news of the sudden and tragic death of James Leslie reached us yesterday morning, there was a palpable sense of shock and a genuine feeling of loss. A young man, almost on the eve of his fifty-first birthday, had suddenly been cut off in the midst of his life.

James Leslie was a son of one of the historic families of North Antrim. Born on 1 March 1958 in Tanzania, east Africa, he had a relatively short but talented career. Educated at Queens' College, Cambridge, he soon showed the early promise that marked him out for distinction in his chosen vocation. He proved the worth of his ability in banking and marketing, both at home and abroad. James followed his father's army footsteps, and gave courageous service in the UDR during the years of the Troubles.

I got to know James Leslie in the electioneering period before the 1998 Assembly. Enthusiastic and energetic, he gave himself wholeheartedly to the campaign. His wisdom and ready reply gained him favour with the North Antrim electorate, and we rejoiced together on being elected. For me, it was a happy experience to share a constituency office with him in Ballymena.

His abilities were soon recognised by the party, and he became the first junior Minister in the Assembly. During those formative early days, his wisdom and willingness to work long hours were invaluable.

James Leslie was a gentleman. His quietly spoken suggestions were of sterling quality. He conducted

himself in an exemplary manner at all times; even when others who were motivated by malice or jealousy derided him, he always smiled and turned the other cheek.

Our sympathy goes out to James's father and mother, his wife, his daughter, Charlotte, and two stepsons, his brother, John, and sister, Rose Jane, and the wider family circle. I am sure that I speak for everyone when I say that we assure them of our prayers and thoughts in these grief-filled days.

The death of James Leslie, so sudden and unexpected, reminds us all of the true realities of life. The Ulster Unionist Party has lost a colleague and a friend, but our country has lost a man of considerable worth. I will always remember what he once said to me:

"We may have won the war, but I hope we do not lose the peace."

The greatest tribute that we in the Assembly can pay to the memory of James Leslie is to ensure that we win the peace.

Mr Dodds: From these Benches, and on behalf of my party colleagues, I express our sincere sympathy to the wife and family circle of the late James Leslie on the sudden passing of their loved one.

When the news of his death came through yesterday, it came as a profound shock to all of us who had worked and served with James in the Assembly. The news is all the more poignant and tragic when one considers his relative youth and that he had still so much to offer to Northern Ireland, through his work, and to his family.

I, and other colleagues, had the privilege of serving with James on a number of Committees in the House. I can testify to his unfailing generosity, courtesy, inherent decency, and quiet manner. He impressed everyone with whom he came into contact.

His loss will be keenly felt by civic society in Northern Ireland, but most of all by his family, and I assure them of our sympathies at this difficult time; they will remain in our thoughts and prayers.

Mr McLaughlin: On behalf of Sinn Féin, I extend the deepest sympathy and condolences to the family of James Leslie. I knew him only briefly as a colleague in what is now referred to as the first mandate of the Assembly. I will always remember him with respect. His politics differed from mine, but he also had exceptional integrity. He listened to the arguments, and during his time in public life he always strove to make a contribution, and he will be remembered for that.

In particular, he represented a tradition that my culture knew as old unionism, and he demonstrated that politicians can span generations and cultures. His commitment to unionism was unfailing, but his ability to see the other side of an argument meant that his contribution invariably spanned all of the arguments,

and his expertise and professional experience was invaluable, particularly in the early days of the Assembly.

I reiterate Sinn Féin's sincere condolences to James Leslie's family, particularly given the circumstances of his death; he was a young man whose valuable life has been cut short. However, he made a lasting contribution and will be remembered for that.

Mr Durkan: We were all shocked and saddened to learn of James Leslie's untimely death. Those of us who worked in the Assembly with James remember him as a first-class legislator. He had a good eye for detail, without being pedantic, and he was concerned about the implications, interpretations and future consequences, financial or otherwise, of any measures.

He brought real consideration to his task as a legislator. He was upfront about his Conservative ideology, and he was honest when he was indifferent to issues. I found that refreshing when dealing with him when he was the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and when I was the Minister of Finance, and also in working with him when he was a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when I was deputy First Minister.

James Leslie had a knack of asking that unnerving question — why? Why are we legislating on this matter? Why are we introducing this measure? Why are Government bothered about this issue? That is why he made such a distinctive contribution to political life. He was a man of courtesy, consideration and clear conviction, and this place was the poorer when he left it.

Our region has lost a good public servant who lent his professional and commercial experience to political life in a positive way. The sooner we can again recruit such insights into active and full involvement in political life, the better. James Leslie made a positive, distinct and, in his own insistent way, modest contribution; but it tells and it stands.

Mr Ford: I will add a few words on behalf of the United Community group. It was, as others said, a huge shock when we heard yesterday morning of the death of James Leslie at such a relatively early age. He made a contribution, even in his brief time here, and had much still to contribute to public life.

I had the pleasure of serving with him on the Environment Committee; and in the Committee and in the Assembly one could see a man who had an eye for detail without being pedantic and who stood up for his principles while maintaining friendships across party lines. That is an example that we should all bear in mind. He was, in every sense of the term, a gentleman; one who came from a group in society that has largely distanced itself from public life in recent years. Yet James threw himself into the everyday life of an MLA to serve the people of Northern Ireland and of North

Antrim in particular. He set a fine example, of which we badly need more.

On behalf of my group, I extend our sympathy to his parents, his wife and daughter, and the family circle.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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

10.45 am

Mr Cree: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the growing negative impact of the current economic downturn on small and medium sized enterprises; recognises that global economic circumstances have significantly restricted the flow of Foreign Direct Investment; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to refocus her Department's policies and resources on support for small and medium sized enterprises.

The foreign direct investment (FDI) boom categorically ended in 2008. All major economies are in recession. Multinationals are consolidating their positions, and they have retreated from many locations around the world to, effectively, lick their wounds and shore up their balance sheets.

Invest Northern Ireland's January update stated that FDI leads have been hit particularly hard. In the Republic of Ireland, for the past 15 years, FDI has formed the backbone of the Celtic tiger economy. However, we are all watching with apprehension as the Republic's economy continues to contract sharply, while the Government there face serious budgetary problems and potential intervention from the International Monetary Fund. Commentators describe the Republic as the fifty-first state, but there is no more room in a "buy American" White House.

What that boils down to is that some opportunities have seriously diminished. Many FDI doors are now closed to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and they will remain closed for at least the entirety of 2009, and most probably 2010. The Minister and the Executive are, however, still tied to a Programme for Government target that seeks to secure inward investment commitments promising 6,500 new jobs by 2011, of which 5,500 will provide salaries above the Northern Ireland private-sector median.

The Ulster Unionist Party is not against foreign direct investment; it welcomes it and believes that we should be working towards securing it wherever possible. However, we are also realists who believe that Governments and Ministers should be able to adapt their policies and targets to accommodate emerging circumstances. The business world must adapt to such circumstances, so it is crucial that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive are able to do likewise.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy, accounting for 81% of private-sector employment and 79% of private-sector turnover. Moreover, 99% of private-sector enterprises are small businesses that employ fewer than 50 people. In the current recession, those businesses are suffering.

In the media, we rightly hear much when larger companies lay off significant numbers of people. However, there is little coverage of the constant flow of businesses that are laying workers off one, two or five at a time. Projections suggest that up to 15,000 jobs are under threat and that unemployment could rise to 50,000 by 2010.

I recognise that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest Northern Ireland have made some improvements. However, contrary to what the Minister announced last week, the Executive are not doing all that they can to help the economy. In the current circumstances, to consider that one can ever do enough smacks of arrogance.

Although the Minister is tied to delivering the notional FDI targets in the Programme for Government, resources will be wasted and time will be lost to help indigenous businesses survive the recession, so that they might emerge on the other side in a more competitive and healthy position. As the example of the Republic shows, indigenous businesses are more durable and sustainable.

FDI should be the icing on the cake of a strong, outward-looking local economy, and that opinion is shared by many business groups in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Manufacturing's excellent paper, 'Manufacturing Counts', states:

"too much attention has been directed by Invest NI towards IT and call centre employment and not enough towards broader industry. It has been too quick to dismiss much of manufacturing as 'sunset industries' not worthy of support".

It continues:

"There is good, sustainable high value added niches to be exploited in all of our manufacturing industries, and this is where Invest NI should be active, helping local firms to be world beaters".

We must get away from the idea that only FDI can deliver high-value-added jobs.

What else can the Minister and the Executive do? Invest Northern Ireland must become more original in order to help Northern Ireland businesses become more innovative.

A less bureaucratic and more targeted service is needed for small local businesses, and we must stop chasing unachievable targets. Furthermore, the support that is available to Northern Ireland companies by Invest Northern Ireland and other organisations needs to be promoted more vigorously and widely. Northern

Ireland companies need greater help to promote themselves on the international market.

The Ulster Unionist Party fully recognises EU state aid laws. It is of paramount importance that we do all that we can as facilitators for business. Any further help that we can provide to reduce companies' overheads will help to retain employment and boost productivity.

In the past year, the work of the Carbon Trust has saved businesses in Northern Ireland £18.3 million. That is not an insignificant amount, but more can be achieved. Glyn Roberts from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association believes that Northern Ireland needs:

"further investment in energy efficiency measures to help businesses save money, particularly investment in worthwhile organisations like the Carbon Trust who have a proven record of delivering for business whilst being clearly under-funded."

I recognise that the Minister invested a further £4.9 million in the summer, but that is not enough, and it represents an opportunity lost. I urge the Minister to make a bid in the next monitoring round for further investment in the Carbon Trust, and I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to listen with sympathetic ears.

Northern Ireland companies are still paying too much for their electricity and energy. In the past year, retailers have seen increases in electricity bills of 60%, and they are paying 20% more than their counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is why the forthcoming review of our energy market is so crucial and why greater energy diversification and security is a must.

I am pleased with the Minister's commitment to that process, but, in the short term, we need to see results, especially in the investment and delivery of renewable energy. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) believes that low-carbon technologies offer the UK an opportunity to enter and lead new markets that are estimated at \$1 trillion. It is imperative that we move more quickly and show more ambition and vision to ensure that we do not lose out to other regions and countries.

There must be investment in alternative energy. America and other economies will be seeking innovation, and we must be at the forefront of that wave of opportunity. When one considers the opportunities that energy efficiency and green technology present, the out-of-date attitude of our Minister of the Environment — who champions himself as a friend of business — moves from the embarrassing to the harmful.

Outside of DETI, we need to accelerate the reform of the planning system, which is clogging the arteries of our economy. The Minister of the Environment must publish Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 5 as quickly as possible so that our town centres will become vibrant and sustainable. Furthermore, the net

loss of jobs that out-of-town developments can bring must be halted, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel and all Departments must deliver on commitments to pay businesses on time.

The Executive have made some positive improvements in recent months. The freezing of non-domestic rates is welcome, as will be the Minister's awaited announcement on small business rate relief. However, I want to see the proposals' details, not least on how the Minister intends to fund such a scheme in these financially constrained times. However, I remain optimistic.

Unfortunately, an attitude prevails among some parties that we are doing all that we can or that we are doing enough. As individuals lose their jobs and as companies go under, I fear that those people will view the Minister's attitude as being cocooned in a different world.

The Programme for Government must be re-prioritised, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment must step up a gear in her approach.

Recently, I spoke about the severe lack of monitoring and evaluation of the Programme for Government targets. That is mirrored in how the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment approaches her economic policies. During this economic crisis, the quarterly review provided by Oxford Economics is not enough. The Minister should provide a more frequent breakdown of the performance of each sector in the economy, details of how that compares with other regions in the United Kingdom and what impact her Department's actions have had. Only proper monitoring and evaluation will inform us of the best way forward. I commend the motion to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan):

The motion refers to the restricted flow of foreign direct investment, which is an issue that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has heard voiced by Invest Northern Ireland and the Department. There has been a reduced resource requirement by Invest Northern Ireland of £14 million in 2009-2010 and £10 million in 2010-11 in response to that very restriction.

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

The Committee has been concerned to ask the officials and the various private-sector interests that have recently appeared, and will appear, in front of the Committee about what else can, and should, be done to support, in particular, our small and medium-sized enterprises during this difficult period.

No one is saying that FDI has gone for good, should not be sought and should not be supported; people recognise its importance, including its importance to our own small and medium-sized enterprises, which can often benefit from supplying the firms that come here with FDI. However, we all have a sense that small

and medium-sized enterprises here are facing acute pressures as a result of market issues.

Market factors have meant that people are seeing customer orders reduce and consumer demand drying up in many instances; however, in other cases, some firms are doing very well. The Committee has been at pains to make sure that, in expressing concern about the downturn, we do not fail to champion the many firms that are navigating their way through these challenging times in quite a positive and interesting way. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and her officials have been at pains to show close support and strong regard for such firms also — not just because they are doing good in themselves with their customers and for their employees, but because they are setting a very good example at a very difficult time.

The Committee has raised issues in the Assembly in the past — for instance; concerns about the decision taken last year to remove the grant involved in the Start a Business programme. We asked the basic question that, if our aim is to support people going into private enterprise, surely we should be supporting them at the starting point. The removal last year of the, albeit small, grant sent out the wrong message and is taking its toll on the uptake of the Start a Business programme.

I know that the Minister has that matter under review in some way. We need to look at more than simply restoring the grant; we should be looking at a number of the other grants that were weeded out over the past number of years. Those grants were withdrawn because it was felt that we did not need them, there was a different climate and there was a different system of market incentives. We need to see whether more intelligent grant support can be applied at this time.

We have a situation in which businesses face a crunch in circumstances where credit is denied, tax is demanded, and grants that existed previously are gone. Although we have a limited role in relation to ensuring that credit is available and in limiting the tax demand, the one area in which we do have a role is in making grants available. Before money that is surrendered by Invest NI and DETI, because of the drying up of FDI, is sent to the centre to go to other good causes and good means of expenditure that can support the economy — which none of us should naysay — the fact is that we need to consider whether that money could be spent in supporting firms and enterprises as well. That is a very important point that we all need to look at.

I mentioned the issue of the banks. That matter is not under our direct control, but Ministers are working on it.

11.00 am

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Committee looks forward to the Treasury Select Committee being in Northern Ireland next week, and the Business and Enterprise Select Committee is also coming here. I hope that that will bring positive attention on the performance of the banks in supporting business here.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome any debate on the economy. However, it is a pity that it is taking place in such gloomy circumstances — as outlined by both Members who spoke previously. I support the motion, although its phraseology might have been better if it had referred to redoubling existing focuses on small and medium-sized enterprises. I am happy to support the motion in the context of the ongoing independent review of Invest Northern Ireland and economic development policy within Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the fact that Northern Ireland's is a small and medium-sized enterprise economy. That fact has been acknowledged already, and that focus is already there through the Department and Invest Northern Ireland.

Before I make some other points, I will touch on a couple of criticisms that I noticed in the proposer's opening comments. I have heard his colleague, and my colleague, on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment be a bit more strident in his criticism of Invest Northern Ireland, and perhaps the criticism is that it is not focused enough on some of our smaller businesses. Hopefully, that criticism will be teased out during the ongoing review. However, if there is a criticism of how that organisation is structured and focused, I look forward to seeing the Member and his colleagues take up that criticism with their party leader, who was responsible for the creation of Invest Northern Ireland.

Once again today, there have been criticisms of the Programme for Government and the focus of the Budget, and a call for its rewriting. It is worth bearing in mind some of the positive steps that are being taken to try to — not overcome the current difficulties, because we see big sovereign Governments having difficulty overcoming the problems we face —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Hold on; let me make my point, and then I will certainly give way.

Steps are being taken to give some comfort and ease, such as the small-business rates-relief scheme, which is due to come in next year; the freeze on non-domestic regional rates; the capping of industrial rates at 30%, which we were all united in calling for and which I am glad to see has happened; and the investment of £1.4 billion this year in our infrastructure, which is offering some assistance and employment to people out there. If those matters were not being implemented by the Executive, or if we were

in a direct rule situation, how much worse might the situation be?

Mr B McCrea: For once, I may have a slight advantage over the Member, in that I remember the time when Invest Northern Ireland was set up as a one-stop shop. It was supposed to encompass all areas — small, medium and large enterprises. The problem was that it then became an organisation focused only on the larger organisations and foreign direct investment. Therefore, there is some question about it. Will the Member consider that the regeneration, or the reinvigoration, of an organisation such as LEDU would be a positive step?

Mr Hamilton: Those issues could be drawn out in the ongoing review. I do not think that anything is off the table in respect of the review. However, the Member's call for the examination of the creation of an organisation such as LEDU again would run contrary to the position advocated by his own party leader in the early part of this decade with the creation of a one-stop shop, and I would love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. Equally, I would love to be a fly on the wall during the conversation, presumably between the proposer and his colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, calling for the re-prioritisation of the Budget to focus even more on the economy, and looking to take some resources away from his budget to spend on economic development.

I would not entirely take the criticism that Invest Northern Ireland is not focused on small and medium-sized enterprises, although I am no advocate for it. I accept, as other Members do, that, in some respects, there are problems with the organisation. The Start a Business programme has helped close to 20,000 individuals get into the business community, and that is a positive outcome. We cannot ignore small and medium-sized enterprises. We cannot have an economic development agency, such as Invest Northern Ireland, and not be focused on small and medium-sized enterprises. Some of the job creations recently have been provided by small and medium-sized enterprises because the companies providing them employ fewer than 250 people.

Last week, I had the privilege of attending the Innovation and Export Awards 2009, at which we were able to celebrate the success of Invest Northern Ireland client companies — Radox Laboratories, Almac, Singularity and Mash Direct, which is in my constituency. Those small companies are doing very well in a global context, with assistance from Invest Northern Ireland.

When discussing support for small and medium-sized enterprises, we should not take our focus entirely away from, or retreat from discussing, foreign direct investment, too. Foreign direct investment is a

hallmark in good economic times. We could now view foreign direct investment through the spectrum of bad economic times and say that it is a bad thing that we should not pursue. However, if we are thinking about how we can reach a strong position in the good economic times, we must recognise that FDI is good. Local companies who supply FDI companies enjoy spin-off benefits from such investment.

As a country, we must position ourselves for the good times and the benefits coming out of an economic upturn in the future. Northern Ireland must continue to sell itself during these difficult times, so that, when times change, we can sell our positive points, as a country and as a small economy, to potential investors. We should not be that fussy about the source of investment in these difficult times, so long as investment is coming our way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: We should focus on the positives and on all potential investors, whether they be small indigenous companies or big foreign direct investors.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, which I support. The economy is now in recession, and, according to all the forecasts from the various Committee witnesses and others, the economic situation will get worse as the year progresses. It is clear that new and innovative ways of thinking are needed if we are to sustain the businesses and jobs that already exist, and offset any further job losses. That also includes creating new investment opportunities and ensuring that people are trained in the necessary skills so that, when the economic climate changes, they will be able to access jobs as they become available.

The economic downturn has had an impact on the anticipated level of foreign direct investment. Therefore, in the current adverse conditions, it is even more important that small and medium-sized businesses and social economy enterprises — because we must not forget about the contribution of social economy enterprises — are given the resources that they need to sustain themselves in the short term, and develop and grow in the longer term.

It is essential that planned funding be made available for the delivery of major infrastructure projects in roads, housing, education and health, and we have heard those matters debated in the Chamber over the past few months. Governments, both in the North and South of Ireland, have an opportunity to maximise the social and employment opportunities for everyone through the public procurement process. That is another essential part of introducing new and innovative ideas. It is also an essential part of the

investment strategy. It is crucial that the opportunity be grasped now to secure current jobs and create new employment opportunities.

The Executive have earmarked something like £20 billion for the public procurement of works, services and goods over the next 10 years. Looking at the matter in an all-island context, almost €16 billion is spent on public procurement each year, most of which goes to companies overseas. As has already been pointed out, SMEs account for a significant proportion of businesses in the North. However, almost three quarters of those SMEs, including those from the social economy sector, do not even apply for public procurement contracts because they feel that the tendering process is stacked against them. There is an excellent opportunity, through working closely with organisations such as InterTradeIreland, Invest NI, IDA Ireland and the enterprise councils, to encourage and develop local SMEs on this island and to enable them to secure contracts for public procurement.

Mr Durkan: On the issue of public procurement, does the Member agree that the whole approach to frameworks very much militates against SMEs being able to compete for, and be involved in, significant contracts? Is she concerned that Northern Ireland Water seems to be following exactly that approach under the name of the “alliance approach”, as they call it? That will mean that only the big firms, generally from outside of here, will be on the list for work from Northern Ireland Water.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree that the tendering process is stacked against some small and medium-sized businesses. There is an opportunity to deliver on the important issues of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity, by actively challenging the existing patterns that perpetuate the issue that the Member talked about.

There are a number of opportunities for social-economy enterprises to enter into business with the public sector and the private sector, and we need to look at innovative ways to take that forward. Banks have already been mentioned; they also have a corporate responsibility to ensure that lending and borrowing facilities are kept open to SMEs and social-economy enterprises.

People are very concerned, as we should be, that the recent injection of public money to steady the banks has not had the desired outcome for businesses across this island. In this period of economic uncertainty, it is important that local businesses have access to the new financial guarantee schemes that have been introduced by the British and Irish Governments as part of the bailout for banks. We need to look at that again, because public money cannot constantly be put into a

black hole where it is going nowhere. We need to look at creating a state bank of some description, whereby public money can be given and redirected into borrowing facilities for businesses. There are also options for organisations such as Invest NI to create an investment fund, so that they too can lend money to businesses and create lending and borrowing facilities for businesses. That approach might bring some sort of result.

In conclusion, I support the motion and ask that the Department and Invest NI refocus to ensure that organisations such as Invest NI redirect those resources and that support to small and medium-sized enterprises. When we are talking about small and medium-sized enterprises, it is important that we do not forget the contribution that social-economy enterprises have made to the economy as a whole and to the local community in challenging disadvantage and need. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: We all recognise the importance of SMEs to Northern Ireland's economy. Indeed, it is important to remember that most SMEs are largely indigenous. In fact, they are really the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy at the moment.

I welcome the ongoing review of Invest Northern Ireland. Since the demise of LEDU, many people have been questioning whether SMEs are getting the support that they need. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has been looking at that issue and questioning officials about it. The classic example that has concerned the Committee — the Chairman has already referred to it — relates to the changes that are taking place to the Start a Business programme. I should declare an interest, as a member of the board of Carrickfergus Enterprise and also as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council. That major scheme was working very successfully indeed, and a number of new businesses were established in Northern Ireland and built from the ground up. Therefore, the Committee has questioned why there is a need for change.

I am led to believe that there has been some form of resolution in relation to the awarding of contracts which were due to be awarded in January, and I would like the Minister to respond to that, because Start a Business provides major scope for the establishment of new businesses in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, I hope that any change that takes place reflects the review of public administration.

11.15 am

Many of us believe that the changes came about too early because of the review of public administration (RPA). The other important thing in relation to SMEs is that they develop at the regional level. For that reason, it is important that the regional offices of Invest Northern Ireland are retained to reflect the changes brought about by RPA.

A few years ago, Dr McDonnell and I had the pleasure of meeting the United States' investment secretary. In the States, there is a scheme to provide loans, guaranteed by banks, for the establishment of SMEs. It has been very successful and, most importantly, as a result of the scheme many women became involved in business. That is something we must encourage in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there used to be a guide called 'Women into Business', which I warmly welcomed. There is an opportunity to expand the Northern Ireland economy, and I encourage DETI and its Minister to consider the scheme that has been established in the United States and decide whether a similar scheme would provide opportunities here.

Last week in the Assembly, I spoke about the importance of the green economy. Great opportunities exist in that sector for both large and small companies.

We all know that the banks have largely created our present problems, and they have a responsibility to get us out of our present situation. I recognise that the Ulster Bank has announced recently that it will set aside finance to assist SMEs and I wholeheartedly encourage other banks to follow that lead.

Mr Newton: This is an important matter. In these difficult economic times, it is right that the economy is being debated in the Chamber. However, it is a serious matter, and is not one to be toyed with. It should not be placed on the agenda either as a party-political strategy or as something that will become a political football. I am sorry that the proposer of the motion described Minister Foster's actions as "arrogant". That is to be regretted.

No single Minister has responsibility for the whole economy. Other Departments have parts to play in the economic well-being of trade and industry and in improving prospects of both. During discussions with owners of SMEs, I have heard them give the clear message to me and to all politicians: give us the tools and we will do the job.

I have already said that the motion is important, but it is not possible to address the difficulties of the owners of small businesses by restricting the debate to the actions of Minister Foster: in that respect, the motion is weak. It is not too difficult to understand how Minister Empey's Department has a major impact on the economy and SMEs. The need to address the skills shortfalls; the upgrading of employees' skills; finding solutions to the further education lecturers' dispute; the problems of apprentices in the construction industry or the sector's refusal to take part in the Minister's fostering programme for apprentices who have been made redundant are important issues. Each of those major problems, which are the responsibility of Minister Empey, has an impact on the business performance of the SMEs.

It is obvious that as Minister Empey addresses those problems — which are crucial to the future of employees and individual businesses — it will be difficult to improve the economy if they are not tackled effectively and efficiently.

SMEs expect us to have in place best-practice training programmes that can deliver the skills that the economy demands.

In a wider context, SMEs want the banks to play a positive role through their lending policies. Minister Foster and her Executive colleagues have been addressing that issue right up at Downing Street levels. In addition, SMEs want an effective and fit-for-purpose road network, and we have debated in the Chamber on previous occasions that they want us to tackle the burden of red tape and bureaucracy.

Right across the spectrum, all Departments have a role to play, and I urge that we work collectively, as an Assembly, and through all the Committees, to address the additional problems and burdens that businesses have at this time in Northern Ireland.

I stress that there is a trap in mistaking activity for action. Whatever we decide, and any Committees' activities, must be transformed into action right down at the coalface of SME service delivery.

Businesses perform best when they are given the freedom to trade. In the past, we have debated the issue of red tape and bureaucracy, and, increasingly, the small-business sector demands that that be addressed. I am never quite sure how we can do that in the European and Westminster contexts; however, where possible, we should be contextualising red tape so that businesses in Northern Ireland are not overly burdened by any further strategies. In fact, SMEs recoil at the mention of Government strategies. They require practical, targeted and measurable assistance that will bring results to the economy.

Finally, I want to see a balance in how that is done; we must not address FDI exclusively, and we must not forget that successful SMEs underpin the economy.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an tairiscint seo. Tá mé sásta labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo. I welcome the motion and I speak in favour of it. I know that there are some concerns about party politics, and that there has been some criticism of Ministers. Nevertheless, the message that we should send out is that we are concerned about small and medium-sized enterprises.

I accept that there has been an Executive response. Simon Hamilton talked about the £1.4 billion in capital investment; the capping of industrial rates at 30%; the freeze on rates; and a rate relief scheme for small businesses that will come into effect, albeit next year.

Small to medium-sized enterprises help the economy, and they do as well as their counterparts in attracting foreign direct investment. There are concerns among small and medium-sized enterprises about the availability of working capital and credit. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has come up with an enterprise finance scheme, and Invest NI, through its accelerated support fund, has tried to deal with those issues.

I hope that the Minister goes away today with some ideas. Tonight, Lisburn City Council will give its response to her economic policy, and there has been criticism of the roles that Invest NI and local councils have played in local economic development.

It is not all criticism. On a positive note, DETI has helped to secure funding from Europe. However, there is also a sense that the priorities of Invest NI are not on small and medium-sized enterprises and that local businesses, for example, see local councils as being more accessible because of the skills and knowledge that councils have about local economic development. Local businesses see the councils as a better avenue than Invest NI, and they see Invest NI's priority as being on foreign direct investment. I hope that that is one of the points that will come out of the review of economic policy and that the Minister takes that on board.

Organisations such as Enterprise NI work closely with councils and have developed economic policies to try to help small and medium-sized enterprises. Such organisations criticise the response to the economic downturn; they see the banks and the car industry being bailed out, so why not local businesses? They have criticised the fact that the terms of reference for the small business support programme were drawn up before the present economic downturn. That is something that could be looked at to try to help small businesses.

Those organisations have also made a relevant point about what they call the "entrepreneurial deficit" in the North. They look to the South, where city and county councils have a statutory responsibility to develop the economy and local businesses. Councils have a budget to support businesses in a proactive way.

Hopefully, the Minister will take on board the role of local authorities. I know that she has referred to the work of Craigavon Borough Council, and I hope that she will take on board the work of Lisburn City Council, Belfast City Council and other councils. Bodies such as Enterprise NI have concerns about the RPA, to which Sean Neeson referred. They have concerns about the 11 new councils taking on the role of economic development and about where DETI will sit with that. Mar a dúirt mé ar dtús, tá mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo.

I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: There can be no question that small businesses are under pressure at this time. In my constituency of Strangford and in every other constituency, barely a week goes by when I do not hear of a business that is suffering or is finding it hard to come to terms with the economic climate.

I am aware of the issues, but the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is even more aware of them, and she is working on the solutions. We must be positive about what the Minister is doing and be aware that other Departments also have to have responsibility. My colleague Robin Newton made that point earlier. One need only take the time to look at the DETI website and read about the daily battles that are being won and the solutions that are being found for small and medium-sized enterprises to know that DETI is already focused on doing its best to bring businesses to the Province and to encourage existing businesses.

DFP haes maed proamishaes tae bring aboot, en fer tae pit in plaes iver £1.4 billyin tae kinstruckshin projects this financial yeer, kumpaered wi' £676 millyin jist iver five yeer aga. This is aw gaun tae help oot schuills, roads, hoaspitals en tha laek in mony perts o' tha kintrie. Iver tha nixt 10 yeer DFP wull bring aboot en pit in tae capital projects £20 billyin throo investment, wrouchtin alangside wee en medyum-sized enterprises. Tha delivern o' thees projects wullnae oanly help oot tha kinstruction industrie bit aw tha feeder suppliers en transport firms etc. This is a' must if we er tae git an bring oorsels oot o' this dip that we er in.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has pledged to deliver £1.4 billion of construction projects this year, compared with £676 million five years ago. That is helping schools, roads, hospitals and many other areas. In the next 10 years, DFP will deliver £20 billion of capital projects through the investment strategy, working closely with small and medium-sized enterprises. That delivery of projects will help construction and all supplementary businesses, such as suppliers and haulage firms. That is a must if we are to bring ourselves out of the dip that we are in.

11.30 am

Banks are part of the key to progress and success. The latest news is that the Ulster Bank has set up a £250 million regional fund to support small and medium-sized enterprises by providing additional debt finance and access to other options to help businesses to manage their capital and cash flow in the current downturn.

The Minister, who has been aware of that and who is very much working in the background, has rightly commended the Ulster Bank for taking that big encouraging step. That flexible scheme will not only give businesses greater scope for day-to-day expenses, but can be taken, I believe, as a sign that banks can see

light at the end of the economic tunnel and are helping businesses to see that light as well.

This, along with offers from other banks and the UK Government's recently announced enterprise fund guarantee scheme, will provide local businesses with a wider range of funding options and will help to boost their confidence and, indeed, that of the community. That is Government in action — working with the wider sector in order to make practical differences to people's lives and businesses in the Province.

The fact that exports are diminishing cannot be denied. The Department is already at work. Its most recent success has been Moore Concrete Products, which is not in my constituency — as Members will be surprised to hear — but in Ballymena. There are photogenic pictures in today's papers. The Minister happens to promote industry in the papers at least two or three times every week.

Moore Concrete Products, which supplies pre-cast concrete products to the agriculture, civil engineering and building industries, used Invest Northern Ireland's trade mission to carry out market research and to gain rights to manufacture pre-cast concrete products. The Netherlands, which is the fourth-most-important European market for Northern Ireland manufacturers, is an attractive market for companies such as Moore Concrete Products. There is much past success to build upon. Customers in the Netherlands purchased goods worth £145 million in 2007-08 — 10% of Northern Ireland's total exports to markets in continental Europe. Again, that is a success story.

As the Minister stated recently, businesses must and will place even greater focus on increasing the value added to their products and services and developing innovative sales and marketing techniques.

The proposer of the motion referred to planning, as did other Members. It is important that planning reform is in place. That is not just Minister Foster's responsibility, but that of other Departments and, in particular, Minister Wilson. A method is in place to fast-track important projects and get things moving. Business is worried, but the Minister will prove that she is up to the challenge. My grandmother had a saying:

“the proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

The Minister will prove that, and it will be an acceptable meal.

Dr McDonnell: I reassure my friend Mr Newton that I have taken note of his sensitivities. I will speak carefully because I do not want to offend his soft and sensitive feelings. I was touched — and I hope that the Minister was, too — that he jumped to her defence.

On a more serious note, I thank my colleagues Mr Cree and Mr McFarland for bringing this timely motion before the House. Indeed, after the shock of

— I was going to say “the collapse”; it is well nigh a collapse — the downward spiral that Northern Ireland has experienced during the past nine or 10 months, much more time must be focused on and support given to people who try to rebuild the economy. The Assembly must take all the constructive action that it can and do as little as possible to talk the economy down further.

We live in challenging times. Many of Northern Ireland's key domestic and international markets are struggling. Consumer and business confidence is in relative free fall. Unemployment is rising. In particular, the current climate is acutely severe and threatening for local small and medium-sized enterprises. My office has been inundated by local businesspeople who are deeply concerned that their hard-built enterprises are on the verge of collapse.

The issues that they face are not new and are no surprise to anybody. We have all heard the stories of cash flow difficulties; limited access to credit; decrease in demand for goods and services; severely reduced profit margins; and, unfortunately, increasing incidence of compulsory staff redundancies.

We cannot underestimate the importance of local SMEs to our economy. The figures that I have been given indicate that 65% or 66% of our private-sector workforce is employed in very small companies that employ fewer than 10 people. I note and welcome the Minister's repeated pledges to do everything possible to support our local SMEs. That is essential if we are to mitigate and offset the worst effects of the recession. However, as the motion rightly points out, global economic circumstances have severely restricted the flow of foreign direct investment.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and, indeed, all of us can always do a little more. I urge Invest Northern Ireland, in particular, to nurture and support existing and new local small and medium-sized enterprises in every way that it can, rather than chasing a crock of gold at the end of a rainbow for foreign direct investment that is not there. Invest Northern Ireland is engaged in a number of worthwhile initiatives to help small businesses, such as credit-crunch seminars. However, it could do more, and it could be more flexible and responsive.

A series of specific measures could be undertaken to deliver targeted, efficient and effective support and assistance to small businesses and to people who wish to start up a small business. Those measures include reinstating the £5,000 business start-up grant, which should be administered by some of the capable local enterprise companies. Those companies are best placed to provide pre-start enterprise and expansion training.

I also urge the Minister to introduce a capital expansion grant for small companies that employ

between two and 10 employees and that want, or need, to grow but do not have the resources. That grant would not only help to offset and mitigate the worst effects of the current situation but could assist in long-term strategic development and changing the tone of Northern Ireland's economy.

Mr Neeson referred to the United States Small Business Administration, and that is a wonderful example of action being taken to bring about economic recovery. Efforts have been made here to get a loan-guarantee scheme for small firms up and running, and I appreciate that it does not seem to work very well. However, we must do whatever we can to ensure that the banks operate that scheme.

The US Government were able to persuade the banks to run a scheme that resulted in £100 million in loans instead of £5 million in grants; the £5 million is an insurance to support those who defaulted. The Executive must apply pressure on the banks to make them more understanding and flexible and to open up the flow of capital.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Obviously, the economic downturn has exercised all parties. I welcome the motion, and my party supports it. The Assembly has repeatedly returned to the issue, and that reflects the concerns in the wider community and constituencies.

The consequences of the economic downturn are obvious. The withdrawal or recasting of credit facilities has had dire consequences for companies, some of them long-standing. There have been daily announcements of redundancies, falling property values and a virtual shutdown of private-sector construction and development. That has consequences for long-standing companies that provide freight and haulage services, which, in many ways, were the spine of our SME sector. There has also been pressure on front line services and increases in energy costs; the list goes on and on.

We have a limited ability to respond in an autonomous fashion, and, indeed, Governments that do have that ability have experienced difficulties. Nevertheless, we have strengths in the very considerable resources that we can apply to capital investment projects. Beyond our traditional resource, which is very strong and obvious, another resource is the strength and vibrancy of our SMEs, which have a proven ability to withstand the most difficult circumstances.

We can, and should, deploy those strengths and pursue every opportunity for FDI. I have not heard any convincing arguments as to why we should abandon that approach. However, the Programme for Government has other dimensions and provides a real opportunity for the Assembly and the Executive to support indigenous enterprises.

I am pleased that the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment addressed the issue of the frameworks; I, too, have addressed it on a number of occasions. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and her ministerial colleagues should review not only the role and function of Invest NI, but general procurement policy and approach. We should talk about unpacking major capital projects to ensure that local enterprises have an opportunity to compete for, and win, contracts. If the bubble had continued, and the economy had continued to grow, we should have been discussing and considering this issue anyway. However, it is now imperative that we do so in order to ensure that local enterprises, skills bases and companies respond to that opportunity. The benefits of such an approach are obvious.

We can continue to address the aims of the Programme for Government and the strategic investment goals. However, when local companies are able to deliver — and not just be restricted to being sub-contractors, through which significant sums, to all intents and purposes, are exported out of our economy — money will be re-circulated to the maximum extent in the regional economy. We will have retention of skills and work squads, opportunities for training and apprenticeships, and support and security for indigenous SMEs.

The motion should be supported on the basis that the targets in the Programme for Government remain robust and attainable. I am certain that the Minister is alive to the urgent need to provide maximum opportunities for SMEs to participate. It is on that basis that we should deploy our strengths and opportunities. There is little point, purpose or benefit in lamenting for what we do not have. Let us apply the resources at our disposal and our own creativity and imagination in order to ensure maximum involvement in the delivery of the capital projects to which we have already agreed. We have the resources to do so.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm a bheith páirteach sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo inniu, agus gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí eile a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht sa Tionól inniu.

I am pleased to take part in the debate, and I thank the Members who proposed the motion.

The likelihood of attracting foreign direct investment is greatly reduced during periods of economic downturn such as we are experiencing at the moment, not only locally but on a global scale. American companies, from which we traditionally draw high levels of FDI, are being encouraged to keep investments at home in order to help their own economy to recover. We should continue to seek FDI — but with realistic expectations.

However, we should seriously consider redirecting resources towards developing local businesses and

industries. Although global recession poses a threat, it also provides opportunities. If it does not force us to fall back on our own resources, it certainly encourages us to concentrate more on growing and developing our own indigenous businesses. Even if local plants are profitable, international companies can, during recession, close them overnight if the international headquarters seeks rationalisation. In recent times, that has happened too often, and we have seen the pain and anguish that it leaves behind. However, it is a fact of the modern global economy.

Although inward investment and support to high-value-added, technology-based business is important and achieving inward investment in technology-based business targets is challenging, they do not provide the total solution for the Northern Ireland economy, especially for those businesses based in peripheral areas and disadvantaged communities, which FDI often does not reach.

We need to develop a mixed economy that values, and applies resources to, the establishment and development of entrepreneurs who are starting locally focused businesses, including family enterprises.

11.45 am

Entrepreneurship is an important driver for economic growth, competitiveness and job creation, and support should be available at a local level for all businesses. Figures from 2007 showed a gap in provision between around 7,000 new businesses registered for VAT, and the support available from Invest Northern Ireland. Locally focused businesses contribute to the Northern Ireland economy by providing employment, income and opportunities in towns, villages and rural areas. They provide the only opportunities for employment and income growth where inward investment is not an option.

Unfortunately, at present, no one has statutory responsibility for supporting locally focused businesses, and whatever support is available is of a stop-start nature. Only a small amount of Invest Northern Ireland's budget goes to locally focused businesses, and the Start a Business programme is now coming to an end.

There is no Northern Ireland-wide programme to support local businesses to develop, grow, innovate and export. Local enterprise agencies do not have core funding, and have often to spend their energies on attempting to stay afloat, rather than doing the important work that needs to be done in continuing to support and develop local business.

Addressing the entrepreneurial deficit in Northern Ireland requires a system similar to that in the South, where city and county enterprise boards have a statutory responsibility. That requires local development plans and budgets for supporting small businesses, and a proactive approach that includes integrated support for

entrepreneurship, which is cross-departmental and co-ordinated by the Minister's Department.

Barriers to entry need to be reduced through the provision of start-up support through a network of business advice centres, with incentives for research, development and innovation. There is a need for a strategy rooted in a statutory basis, with a clear policy framework, accountable to the Assembly, and a consistent long-term approach based on best practice, wherever it is found. Out of that should come regional action plans supported by longer funding cycles and managed by local education authorities, further education colleges and the local councils. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Wells: I support the motion. The difficulty with speaking last in a debate is that there is little that has not already been said. However, for the benefit of next week's 'Mourne Observer', I will say it anyway.
[Laughter.]

I am grateful to the Federation of Small Businesses, which has provided me with some interesting statistics on the importance of SMEs to the Northern Ireland economy. Their role is pivotal — they account for 81% of all private-sector employment in the Province; they employ 500,000 people; and 41% of the entire employment in Northern Ireland is in the SME sector, compared with 32% in the rest of the United Kingdom. We are dealing with the engine of our economy. If we allow the SME sector to stagnate or decline dramatically, the impact on the entire Northern Ireland economy would be very severe.

I will deal with one issue that I am sure other honourable Members have been faced with: the difficulty in obtaining funding. I have been approached by companies in my constituency that have very strong credit ratings; have had a long history of borrowing from one of the big four established banks in Northern Ireland; have had no default on their credit; and have paid their monthly instalments to the bank with no difficulties whatsoever. That has enabled them to grow as SMEs, and to increase employment.

Since the onset of the credit crunch, however, those perfectly reputable and solid institutions are finding it more and more difficult to obtain not new credit, but simply an extension to the credit that they enjoyed for decades.

I was approached by a company in my constituency that employs 120 people and that has run into a brick wall in trying to obtain further credit that would allow it to continue to employ and to invest. Indeed, the FSB has indicated that one third of SMEs in Northern Ireland have experienced difficulties in obtaining adequate funding for future expansion.

We all welcome the Ulster Bank's decision to make £250 million available for small companies to invest. However, would that have happened had it not been

for the link between the Ulster Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland? The Government now own some 70% of that bank's shares, which has forced its subsidiaries to start lending to small business. Where are the Bank of Ireland, Allied Irish Bank and the Northern Bank — the other three major banks in Northern Ireland — when it comes to providing much-needed finance for companies? The problem for customers of those three banks is that it can be very difficult to transfer to the Ulster Bank for all sorts of technical reasons. Therefore, the new funding is available only to new companies that are starting up or to existing Ulster Bank customers. That sector is experiencing major difficulties.

Furthermore, there seem to be real problems with the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, which is itself an excellent proposal. However, so far in Northern Ireland, only 3% of SMEs have been able to avail themselves of that scheme. We require a dramatic increase in the liquidity and availability of funding; but not rash funding, because we all realise why we are in this mess. It is because banks, particularly in America, were prepared to lend money to companies and individuals who had no prospect of being able to repay their loans — the toxic-debt syndrome. The problem is that we have swung in the opposite direction. We are now in a situation in which perfectly reputable and solid companies cannot go any further. Without funding, it is curtains for some of those companies.

I urge the Minister to use her good influences to try to ensure an easing of that particular logjam. I realise that the Minister and the Department have a limited role, because we are dealing with large, multinational banking companies. As much as I would like the Minister to be able to walk into the headquarters of any of those large banks, crack a whip and tell them what to do, that could be difficult. However, I would like to think that the Executive and the Minister can use their influence to tell the banks to start lending again to solid companies in Northern Ireland in order to get people back into employment. If that does not happen in the next six or seven months, I will be deeply concerned about the future of SMEs in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I thank the Members who tabled the motion, as it allows me to reaffirm my Department's commitment to supporting our SMEs, which are, effectively, the backbone of the Northern Ireland economy. Despite the pejorative remarks that were made at the beginning of the debate, it also enables me to clarify the policies, programmes and resources that are in place and that seek to have a positive impact on the local SME sector.

I wholeheartedly reject the allegation that I am cocooned or that I am arrogant with regard to our small

and medium-sized enterprises. Why would I have asked for a review of Invest Northern Ireland and departmental policies if I were arrogant or cocooned? Why, if that were the case, would I have asked a subgroup of the Economic Development Forum to bring forward actions for the short term? Why would I have listened to the concerns that were raised with me about the Start a Business programme, particularly on the removal of the grant system? Why would I have asked for a review of that programme and for evidence of the impact that the removal of the grant system has had on it?

In common with other UK regions and countries across the globe, Northern Ireland is now facing significant economic pressures. The private sector has been reporting substantial job losses, and of all the confirmed redundancies in the past year, about half were from our SMEs. That is a worrying indication of just how difficult current trading conditions are. In January 2009, for example, Invest NI clients reported a total of almost 600 redundancies, compared with a previous monthly average total of 226 redundancies.

Based on its current levels of work in progress, Invest NI has also seen evidence of a reduction in business development activity across the sectors. That suggests a mood of caution, with clients deciding either to defer or, indeed, to slow down investment plans. That situation extends beyond the indigenous business base, with the early-stage pipeline of new FDI prospects also reduced significantly in comparison with those that existed at the same point last year.

However, given that we have a regional economy and a large public sector, historically, we have been somewhat insulated from the most marked swings in the economic cycle. Obviously, our proximity to the Republic of Ireland and the current exchange rate also work to our advantage, particularly the impact on the retail sector and the opportunities for export. Those factors, to some extent, should help to cushion our economy from the full — and I mean, “the full” — impact of the downturn.

Indeed, independent economic forecasters — and not just Oxford Economics — indicate that, as regards output and employment, Northern Ireland will not be more adversely affected than the other UK regions during the downturn. I get a range of forecasts, not just those from Oxford Economics. However, I have told Members time and time again that economic forecasting is not an exact science, and, at present, those forecasts can range in difference.

We have a regional economy, but we also have a SME economy. In 2007, there were an estimated 132,000 business in Northern Ireland, 99% of which were small and medium-sized enterprises — businesses employing fewer than 250 people. Small and medium-

sized businesses account for 81% of the private-sector employment in Northern Ireland, compared with 59% in the UK as a whole. Therefore, SMEs really are what Northern Ireland is all about.

Government support for businesses in Northern Ireland is therefore largely directed towards assisting the SME sector. The SME business base is core to the success of the Northern Ireland economy, and Invest Northern Ireland contributes towards its development by providing support to new start-ups and the expansion of existing business.

Invest Northern Ireland also continues to develop new schemes of support focused on encouraging business starts and accelerating the growth of its SME clients. One such example is the growth accelerator programme, which is specifically tailored to meet the needs of small businesses by providing a short assessment and assistance of up to £130,000 to help SMEs to enter new markets or to bring new essential skills to their businesses.

I reject the allegation that we do not help the manufacturing industries and that we identify those as sunset industries. I accept that the area of manufacturing has been the subject of some of the worst news. However, some indigenous manufacturing companies have also been the subject of our best news, especially those in the areas that Invest Northern Ireland identified as growth areas such as pharmaceutical companies, including Randox Laboratories and Almac Sciences.

Some 28% of the assistance offered goes to contact centres in ICT, and the remaining 72% goes to all other sectors, which includes manufacturing in its widest sense.

We held 10 seminars — attended by representatives from 560 clients companies — across Northern Ireland to help deal with the credit crunch. Participants at the events had the opportunity to discuss their individual business needs in detail and to identify key projects to improve their performance and the possibility of taking advantage of the £5 million accelerated support fund.

The EU has introduced a temporary relaxation of some state-aid measures in response to the current economic conditions, because viable businesses are under pressure — a point that was well made by my friend Mr Wells — and in difficulty, through a squeeze on credit and a weakness in demand.

The UK Government, through the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, have notified a framework for small amounts of compatible aid under this temporary relaxation, and my officials are urgently considering how those flexibilities can be used to help Northern Ireland businesses to weather the economic storm.

Meanwhile, Invest Northern Ireland continues to work hard with its clients to identify and exploit new

export markets, particularly given the advantages presented by the current exchange rate. During a trade mission to the Netherlands, I saw at first hand the determination of our local companies to establish and cultivate trade links with our European neighbours. Mr Shannon made that point.

12.00 noon

In relation to Mr Butler's point about working more closely with councils and local enterprise agencies, he will be pleased to know that I was in Lisburn at 7.45 am today to attend a credit-crunch seminar hosted by his own council. We have run a series of such seminars, and have recognised that the client base of Invest NI is limited. We wanted to work with companies that are not clients of Invest NI. Therefore, we have worked in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland, the district councils and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and we have developed a programme that provides the wider local business community with the opportunity to avail itself of specific advice and guidance regarding the current economic climate and its impact.

Mr Cree mentioned energy prices in Northern Ireland, which are a worry to a lot of firms. Indeed, all Northern Ireland businesses can access the Carbon Trust's interest-free loan scheme that is doing a tremendous job to achieve its aim, which is to maximise energy efficiency. I understand that around 940 companies have benefited from energy-efficiency advice and that a couple of hundred more companies will benefit from that advice this year.

Mr Cree commented on the need for more money, as expressed by Mr Roberts of NIRTA. Members know that I have repeatedly said — in the Chamber and outside — that I will be very sympathetic towards any application for further funding from the Carbon Trust in relation to energy efficiency. However, to date, I have not had any approaches in respect of that issue. Therefore, it is not a case of my not sending the right messages to people. If that approach is made, I will be very sympathetic.

Many Members, among them the Chairperson and Mr Neeson, spoke about the Start a Business programme, which has operated for around nine months without a grant. I said at the beginning of my speech that concerns about that issue have been relayed to me, and that I was keen to continuously monitor the impact of grant withdrawal, particularly given the rapidly changing economic conditions. I have asked Invest NI to commission an independent review of the evidence to date, and to seek the views of clients who have dropped out of the scheme. I hope to have that before the end of the week. Once the independent review is completed, I will share the report's findings with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee and with Members in general.

The current programme will close at the end of March 2009. The new enterprise development programme, which Mr Neeson referred to, will commence in April.

Members mentioned our local banks during the debate. Members know that I have met representatives of the banks in order to discuss concerns that have been raised. I also raised concerns about the conditions that apply to new national schemes that have been introduced. Mr Wells spoke about the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, and assured me that the new scheme is designed to be easier to administer than the old — small firms loan guarantee — scheme. My Department is working with local banks to try to get the information out there so that we can have a better take-up than the small firms loan guarantee scheme, to which Dr McDonnell referred. For some reason, Northern Ireland had a very poor take-up of that scheme, compared with the rest of the UK.

Meanwhile, Invest NI's offer activity at the end of January 2009 totalled almost £130 million; twice as much as was offered at the same point last year. Innovation and capability development also showed significant increases of 28% in offers and 79% in assistance.

Inward investment projects approved, to date, in 2008-09 intend to promote 2,981 new jobs and safeguard a further 993 existing jobs. That corresponds to increases of 140% and 180% respectively, compared to the position this time last year.

Although those provisional results indicate a successful year for Invest NI, it is likely, and we must be cognisant of the fact, that many investors may bank those offers of assistance in preparation for a medium-term upturn. In other words, they may not take advantage of the offers that have been made to them, which, in turn, will mean that the drawdown of those commitments will be delayed — something that we must bear in mind.

Closer examination of Invest NI's work-in-progress statistics also shows a significant decline in the number of potential projects that are scheduled to come to fruition in the medium to long term.

The number of long-term larger projects in the pipeline has decreased by 55% compared with the same period in 2007-08. In the current global climate, it is to be expected that some prospective investors will want to defer projects for implementation in the medium term. However, it is important to realise that we are talking about deferment, and not the closing of the door that has been mentioned by some Members today. I agree with Mr McLaughlin's comment that it would be foolish not to pursue further FDI. We can build our small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland while looking for the inward invest that is needed in the region — the two actions are not mutually exclusive.

Ms J McCann and Mr McLaughlin made comments about public procurement: I heard what Mr McLaughlin said on the issue and will examine it. Ms J McCann will know that InterTradeIreland is doing some very good work on public procurement and is holding seminars across the island of Ireland to try to help smaller contractors get Government contracts. I received an update on that work recently.

As we move through the economic downturn, continuing to pursue value-added inward investment is central to the success of my Department and the long-term goals of the entire Executive. Northern Ireland continues to display the strong attributes that make the region attractive to investors, such as a highly educated workforce, strong infrastructure, competitive costs, proximity to Europe and a pro-business focus. All of those attributes are very strong selling points for Northern Ireland.

My departmental policies and resources cannot be looked at in isolation, which was a point made by my friend the Member for East Belfast Robin Newton and the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon. As chairperson of the Economic Development Forum, I established a private-sector led subgroup to consider additional measures to help businesses through the economic downturn. The initial recommendations of that subgroup point to a range of cross-departmental actions, which cover my Department, DRD, DOE, DEL and DFP. Those recommendations include: assisting the construction sector; identifying financing issues that affect SMEs; suggesting financing solutions and identifying medium-term actions to prepare for the future upturn. I hope that we will be able to discuss that report at the Executive in the very near future.

We cannot change the world, but we can offer support to businesses at this difficult time. We will continue to work alongside our local businesses to help them reduce the impact of the downturn, enable them to sustain their businesses, and help them to prepare for the future so that when confidence in the financial markets returns, they will have the skills and tools to take early advantage of the improvements. I am glad that I had the opportunity to clarify some of the points that were raised in the debate.

Mr B McCrea: Perhaps it is in the nature of politics that people are inclined to think that their particular view of the world is correct. They try to lecture other people, telling them to listen carefully because they might learn something. I also suspect that while people are doing that, they are also tempted to make party political points in order to explain why their side knows better and that the other side is missing the point. In the current circumstances, that is not the right way forward.

I declare an interest as a former chief executive of Northern Ireland Manufacturing, and I will refer to

some of the issues that I learnt during that period. For the record, I am also a director of Atlas Communications. The issue that one learns when talking to a body such as Northern Ireland Manufacturing is that one has to win a battle to convince people that there is a right way forward. I put it to Members, gently, that not everyone was always fully supportive of a cap on industrial derating, and a look through the Hansard reports of debates over a number of years is quite illuminating. I mention that only because some of what I say may be of some help.

The Minister started her speech by asking why she was being accused of being arrogant, out of touch, insular, etc. What I want to do is to find a way to work collaboratively and collectively with everyone.

Certain points were made that merit attention. Of particular concern is the issue of construction. Some Members talked about the very important steps that the Ulster Bank has taken, and mention was made of an economic survey that I suspect that everybody has read. Northern Ireland went into recession before the global economic downturn because of an unsustainable housing boom. Our Celtic tiger economy was built without Celtic tiger industry.

In case anybody has difficulties with the language, I shall cite a particular Ulster Bank document, which states that Northern Ireland house prices were two thirds of the UK average in April 2005, and all regions, bar Scotland, had prices above Northern Ireland. That document also states that Northern Ireland had overtaken the UK and ROI averages by February 2007, and prices were increasing by 56% each year.

In addition, the document highlights that Northern Ireland had the third-highest house prices of any UK region by August 2007, but Northern Ireland has the lowest average wages in the UK and the highest rates of economic inactivity, as we all know. Furthermore, the paper states that Northern Ireland is expected to fall back down the regional house price table, and its position will reflect its economic fundamentals.

I want to hear from the Minister, her Department and her Executive colleagues what exactly their ambition is for Northern Ireland. What is the Minister's vision for the economic future of this place? How will Northern Ireland make its way in the world? I very much suspect that it will not be on the basis of a return to a construction boom that is based on housing. We must find some way of adding value that can be invested in our other services.

I want the Minister to be a business champion. I am quite sure that she will take on that challenge. When all sectors of industry evaluate the question of who understands their challenges and can resolve their issues, the answer should be the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I now come to some of the comments that were made by colleagues around the Chamber. Leslie Cree posed a question about what more could be done. I suspect that we will hear more bad news sooner rather than later. The public will quite rightly ask those of us who make our living up here what we are going to do about the situation. There is no room for complacency. If we are to maintain the confidence of the public, we must be seen to be doing something.

Mark Durkan made quite a prescient comment when he asked what else can be done. My answer is that we must examine risk. A number of Members said that all businesses are contracting and becoming averse to risk. The trouble is that that leads to illiquidity, which perpetuates the global downturn. Government must take the lead in removing — and encouraging people to take — risks. That is not something that Government, particularly civil servants, traditionally do.

Simon Hamilton mentioned Invest NI and the creation of jobs, but we all know that all we have really had is churn. Over the past five years, many jobs have been lost from the highly paid and high GVA manufacturing sector. Those have been replaced with short-term part-time jobs in the service industries.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member obviously missed the jobs announcement by First Derivatives plc, the average annual wage of which is £40,000. Does he accept that that is a good investment?

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure why the Minister feels the need to highlight that point. The big challenge for Northern Ireland is productivity. In previous statements, her colleague the First Minister said that Northern Ireland must address productivity. We must generate more earnings from the existing workforce.

Jennifer McCann quite rightly highlighted procurement issues. Procurement frameworks are detrimental to SMEs. Rather than just talking about that, I would like to see some forward movement.

I listened to what Robin Newton had to say. I apologise for agreeing with him on three or four points, because that will probably not go down terribly well.

However, he was right to say that we must work collectively, and he was correct in saying that the upgrading of skills is key if the economy is to emerge from the crisis. He used a good turn of phrase when he said that we must not mistake “activity for action”. I agree with Mr Newton that there must be a balanced approach to dealing with FDI, as well as SMEs.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will only give way for a quick point, because I wish to finish.

12.15 pm

Mr Newton: I also described the motion that was proposed by Mr Cree and Mr McFarland as weak, because it does not call for collective action.

Mr B McCrea: I realise that Mr Newton and I do not agree on every point; perhaps that will get him off the hook.

I am about to finish the political career of another Member now. Speaking towards the end of the debate, Jim Wells derided his own lack of anything to add. However, he hit the nail on the head and made what was by far the most pressing contribution to the debate. He acknowledged that what the Ulster Bank is doing is great, but he asked what action is being taken by the other big three banks — and I think that I am right in taking that to mean the Bank of Ireland, the Allied Irish Bank (AIB) and the Northern Bank? The problem is that two of those banks are headquartered in the Republic of Ireland.

Perhaps the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will raise my next question with her Executive colleague Nigel Dodds: why has he not gone to speak to Brian Lenihan, and why did he not attend the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council at which the banks were discussed? The one question that I want answered is why the Bank of Ireland and AIB are not following the suit of the Ulster Bank by enabling businesses to access funds. Pressure must be brought to bear from the highest level on those banks.

Alasdair McDonnell talked about capital grants, and he has a point; a way must be found to encourage expenditure by the private sector. I want to find out what the Minister might do in that regard.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I would give way to the Minister, but I have only enough time to conclude.

I want a different attitude to be taken to risk, and that should be led by the Government, perhaps in agreement with the Assembly and the Public Accounts Committee. I also want a new approach to procurement, particularly to the frameworks that do not help the SMEs. In light of the Ulster Bank's initiative, I want action to be taken on the banks whose headquarters are in the ROI. Most importantly, I want the Minister to outline her vision for the future of Northern Ireland after it emerges from the current economic mess.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

“That this Assembly notes with concern the growing negative impact of the current economic downturn on small and medium sized enterprises; recognises that global economic circumstances have significantly restricted the flow of Foreign Direct Investment; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to refocus her Department's policies and resources on support for small and medium sized enterprises.”

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Before the debate on the Alliance Party's motion, I wish to raise a point of order to which I do not expect to receive an instant answer because of its complexity. However, it is an issue that the Speaker, the Business Office and Members must consider, at least in future.

Every Minister in the Executive operates on the basis of his or her legal authority. Part of the decision-making process in which any Minister is involved requires him or her to carry out certain duties that relate to that decision. If they do not carry out those duties properly, their decisions can be judicially reviewed.

Nowhere is that more important than in the office held by the Minister of the Environment, particularly when the decisions are on planning matters. The Minister responsible for the Department of the Environment is required by law to consider matters, including the call for a public inquiry, under certain criteria. However, the resolution to which the Alliance Party asks the Assembly to agree would impose a duty on the Minister to obey.

It would be all right if it were a local council calling on the Minister to look at a matter, but when the Assembly calls on a Minister to do that, the Assembly itself has power, in that under the Pledge of Office, which is now part of our ministerial code, a Minister is compelled by law — the Pledge of Office has statutory authority — to act in accordance with the Assembly's decision. Therefore, if the motion were to be passed, the Minister would be compelled by the Assembly's decision to act — not because of the legal requirements that he must take into account, but because of the Assembly's decision to call for a public inquiry.

Therefore, two competing legal obligations are placed on the Minister: the normal legal obligations — laid down in planning law — that he must consider when calling a public inquiry, and the Pledge of Office/ministerial code requirement, which may require a decision in a different direction to be taken. The Minister can be punished if he does not obey.

Those conflicting matters put the Minister of the Environment in an impossible situation. The Assembly does, on this occasion, have a way out, because the DUP has tabled an amendment that does not do violence to the Alliance Party's overall ambition but expresses a view for the Minister to take into consideration. That is very different from requiring him to take a decision.

I draw that point to the attention of the House. We are all on a learning curve — officials included — but I am not sure whether the wording of the motion should have been allowed to appear in the Order Paper,

taking into account the legal obligations that are placed on a Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will refer that point of order to the Speaker for resolution.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

George Best Belfast City Airport

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 are called to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mr B Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to set up a public inquiry under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 in relation to the application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport, in order to properly test all of the relevant economic and environmental arguments.

From what the First Minister has said, the wording that he has suggested may be appropriate, but I will return to that presently.

I will clarify my views on the motion: I am totally opposed to the runway extension at George Best Belfast City Airport. However, that is not the intention of the motion, which calls for the extension application to be referred to a public inquiry. The support for a public inquiry is widespread, ranging from local councils, including those most affected — Belfast and North Down — to many thousands of local residents, and from the largest user of the airport, Flybe, to Belfast International Airport. Those concerns must be addressed in a transparent manner, and that can be done only through a public inquiry.

This is not a straightforward planning application. It will affect the lives of thousands of residents and will be of strategic significance to the development of the Northern Ireland economy. It raises important and serious structural, social and environmental issues, which cannot be examined under the normal planning process. The case for there being a public inquiry under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 is overwhelming. It is essential that stakeholders have an opportunity to make their case.

A public inquiry would give those people most affected — particularly those in Holywood and east Belfast — the right to have their concerns and views heard. It would allow for the independent scrutiny of the noise, health and environmental impacts of the proposed extension. In particular, it would enable the examination of the impact of the changes made under the 2008 planning agreement, and the introduction of the larger Boeing 737 aircraft last year.

The inquiry would also examine the economic benefits and disbenefits to the Northern Ireland economy overall and evaluate the impact of the possible displacement of passengers from Belfast International Airport, potentially threatening its long-term viability and its ability to compete with Dublin Airport.

The company involved promotes the issue of an extended runway as being the environmental impact on residents against the economic benefits to the Northern Ireland economy. That grossly underestimates the environmental impact and exaggerates the economic benefits, if any.

Nowhere does the company attempt to justify its claims of economic benefits, which must be considered by a public inquiry, because, although there would be financial benefits for the company, there is no evidence of benefits to the economy as a whole. Indeed, the 2003 White Paper, 'The Future of Air Transport', suggested that any increase in airport capacity in Northern Ireland should take place at Belfast International Airport.

Several economic benefits have been suggested. First, there would be increased employment. New jobs would be created in constructing the runway; however, in the long term, few new jobs would be created. The proposed increase in the number of flights is less than 10%, which is unlikely to create extra jobs in servicing the airport. Any new jobs are likely to result from the displacement of jobs from Belfast International Airport.

Secondly, it has been suggested that tourism would increase. Most tourists expect to travel 10 or 20 miles after arriving at a foreign destination — Ryanair passengers normally expect to travel at least 50. Being able to travel the slightly shorter distance from Belfast City Airport would not be likely to influence a tourist wishing to visit Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, increased business traffic is envisaged. Belfast City Airport already provides an excellent service to most UK cities. Unfortunately, no European city can justify a regular flight to Belfast based on business travel alone, and in the past year, it has been necessary to withdraw routes to several European cities. Indeed, the present business user is more likely to be discouraged by having to queue behind 300 holiday makers bound for Tenerife or Malaga.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: No, sorry.

I suspect that Flybe opposes the extension because it would disrupt its regular business custom to British cities and change the nature of the airport.

Belfast City Airport has waged a propaganda campaign against a public inquiry, stressing economic advantages for the local economy; it even commissioned a poll to demonstrate how much the public supports its plans. However, the poll asked the wrong, and leading,

questions, it ignored the main issues, such as the environment, and it polled the wrong people — for example, businesses in Belfast city centre were polled, but those in affected areas, such as Holywood, Sydenham and east Belfast, were not. In addition, most of the research was carried out before the proposed runway extension became public knowledge. As a reflection of public opinion, the poll has no credibility.

As an economist, I envisage no significant economic benefits from the proposed runway extension; on the other hand, I do envisage serious social and environmental problems. The new planning agreement allows a significant increase in passenger numbers and an additional 3,000 flights; the arrival last year of Ryanair's Boeing 737s caused a 122% increase in the number of people who are significantly affected by noise. Before considering further increases, the impact of those changes on local residents should be assessed. Despite assurances that flights would be directed over Belfast Lough, almost 90% of planes still fly over residential areas.

The runway extension will lead to increased noise pollution. The extension has been proposed in order to allow fully loaded, fully fuelled large jets to take-off, using the full length of the extended runway. Given that larger planes are much heavier, take-offs would inevitably be lower and louder.

The Eastern Health and Social Services Board — a key strategic consultee — has voiced major reservations concerning the increased risk to health that the extension would pose. However, the board was not consulted by the Planning Service, so a health-impact assessment has not been carried out.

Thousands of people are forced to endure the airport's unrelenting expansion, which affects them greatly, while fewer than 20 miles away, a two-runway airport exists, with plenty of spare capacity, no noise issues, no need for an operating curfew, no cross-wind problems, no bird reserve considerations, and no densely populated areas in the vicinity.

One must ask why the company is so opposed to a public inquiry. Why is it against open public debate? In the absence of an overall strategic examination of the airport's capacity, a public inquiry is required to answer several questions. Although developing a regional plan for airports is a reserved matter, this region's airport capacity should be assessed.

One must ask oneself how the economy will benefit from the runway extension. I query whether it will benefit.

12.30 pm

Dr W McCrea: Does the Member agree that it would be foolish to make a decision in a piecemeal fashion without obtaining a proper strategic aviation

strategy for Northern Ireland? Surely it is vital that such a strategy is produced for Northern Ireland. That will ensure that we are doing what is right for the economic advancement of Northern Ireland plc and not for one area of Northern Ireland.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree with his comments; perhaps I did not make the point as clearly as he did, but that is what I intended to say. The decision should not be based on a one-off event; we should look at the overall strategy.

How will the extension meet the European criteria for a city airport? There are restrictions on city airports, and we must establish whether the new extension would comply with those restrictions. One should also ask oneself whether major infrastructure improvements will be required. At many times of the day, the Sydenham bypass is like a giant car park. Do we want to increase the number of cars using that bypass? How would that increased usage affect passengers?

There are many other questions to ask. Would the increase in noise and air pollution that would be suffered by the residents of north Down and east Belfast be acceptable? How would the displacement of tourist traffic impact on Belfast International Airport? Will Belfast International Airport be denied the critical mass of passengers to compete effectively with Dublin Airport for international flights? What are the long-term implications for the development of air travel in Northern Ireland? Will we see further applications to expand the number of flights at George Best Belfast City Airport?

Recently, I asked Brian Ambrose for an assurance that he would not seek a further increase in the number of flights for the airport. He was unwilling to provide that assurance. However, the runway extension will not make economic sense unless there is a significant increase in flights. I assure Members that there will be further applications if the extension is approved.

Those questions and many other issues need to be resolved, and that can be done only through a public inquiry. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm when Mr Jimmy Spratt will be the first Member to speak.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise the Assembly that the Speaker is satisfied that it is in order for the debate to proceed. As the Speaker will consider and take counsel on the wider issues that were raised by the First Minister, I do not intend to take any further points of order on this matter.

Mr Spratt: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out “to set up” and insert “to take note of the view of this Assembly that there should be”.

I ask the Minister to note the view of the Assembly with regard to a public inquiry into the proposed runway extension at Belfast City Airport.

I am elected to the House as a representative of the people of South Belfast, an area in which a significant number of households are affected by runway noise and the environmental impact of the nearby airport. I also represent the businessmen of the South Belfast area, and other sectors that benefit from having an easy, accessible airport on the doorstep of the city centre. I also represent the unemployed of that area, who desperately seek employment opportunities at this time and young people who are seeking apprenticeship opportunities.

In the light of the variety of such interest groups, the proposal to extend the runway at Belfast City Airport left me, and my colleagues in East Belfast, questioning how best to represent the diverse opinions in that constituency. As the Minister comes to a decision regarding the need for a public inquiry, it is vital that all issues pertaining to the runway extension planning application are rigorously examined in detail, to ensure that all environmental planning and technical issues are addressed fully by the Planning Service.

It is vital that the Minister considers the concerns of the people who, everyday, live under the flight path and whose lives are impacted upon because of where they live. Furthermore, it is important that the economic development of Belfast and Northern Ireland plc is also considered fully. There is much debate over the environmental impact that any extension of the runway would bring. We note the concerns of residents who express alarm at a rapid increase in the number of flights a year, an increase in the number of large, noisy jets, and the subsequent noise pollution and fear of increased health risks.

In contrast, the application argues that the extension will not involve any change to the number of flights or the size of aircraft using the runway. Furthermore, representatives of Belfast City Airport state that any change in noise level will be indistinguishable. The

Minister must consider those differences in opinion as he reaches a decision regarding a public inquiry.

We must also consider the economic impact of a runway extension at Belfast City Airport. Again there is a difference of opinion, this time between representatives of that airport and representatives of Belfast International Airport. Representatives of Belfast City Airport state that an extra 100 jobs would be created if a runway extension takes place and that, with the runway extension, George Best Belfast City Airport anticipates over 500,000 European visitors, which will generate £120 million of tourist revenue. That will have obvious benefits to tourism, local business and the wider economy.

However, set against that are the arguments put forward by representatives of Belfast International Airport. They argue that, in order to establish and sustain a firm competitive platform, the Northern Ireland Executive must be mindful of the example south of the border. In the Irish Republic, a strategic focus has been put on Dublin Airport as its single most valuable asset. The representatives of Belfast International Airport argued that the runway extension will result in jobs being displaced rather than created, and that fragmentation of the market in favour of our key competitor at Dublin will only ensure that our capacity as a region to invest in key target routes for tourism and inward investment will be seriously depleted.

Those are just some of the arguments and differing opinions that have arisen from the planned extension of the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport, and those arguments have resulted in calls for a public inquiry. That has brought out a difference in opinion. A public inquiry is considered only where that process will provide additional information to inform a final decision that is not available through final consultation.

I urge the Minister to consider whether that is the case, in light of the continuing differences of opinion that I have just outlined. If he believes that to be the case, then he should call for a public inquiry; if not, then he should act accordingly.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion in its call for a public inquiry. The Member for South Belfast has, in his own way, argued for a public inquiry, even though the DUP amendment does not call for that. However, I accept that Mr Spratt has a number of clear differences of opinion. He urged the Minister to consider all of those, and, at that point, decide whether to call for a public inquiry. In some ways, the Member lent some support to the notion of a public inquiry.

My party supports the call for a public inquiry, precisely because it feels that there are a great many competing and fundamental differences of opinion, which I do not want to go into this afternoon — a

number of other Members wish to contribute to the debate. However, many of those issues are around wider regional strategic matters, including finance, the environmental impact, and so on. I do not want to rehearse any of those arguments.

However, I want to make a number of brief points. I want to place on record the fact that, in my view, the management of Belfast City Airport has, over several years, done a tremendous job in trying to ensure that it runs an excellent facility. It would be fair to say that the travelling public who use the airport have, increasingly, found a much better and more professional service. However, in saying that, I know that some people in my constituency, and in the neighbouring constituency, will not be too pleased to hear it. Nevertheless, I want to place on record the fact that the management has done a good job within its remit to expand the airport and make it a much better facility for those who use it and those who work there.

I remind the House that the original permission for the airport, which was supported by all the parties in Belfast, was on the basis that it would be a city airport. Arguments were put forward clearly and cogently at the time that such an airport would be of great benefit to the economy of the city and further afield. It was always designed, planned and intended to be a city airport, not an international airport.

Mr McLaughlin: Does the Member agree that this is a small regional economy with a population of 1·7 million and that we have airport facilities in a number of locations? Belfast International Airport has significant unused capacity, and it is critical that any development proposal for the airports should take account of the strategic overview and be deployed in the interests of continuing to develop the economy here.

Mr A Maskey: In my opening remarks, I said that we must consider any development or expansion plans for the George Best Belfast City Airport in the wider regional strategic context. Therefore, I agree with the Member.

I remind Members that this was always intended to be a city airport, and permission was granted on that basis. It is also important to remind ourselves that a number of conditions were placed on the operation of the airport, and that all of the important environmental standards had to be adhered to.

The operating licence imposed restrictions on the times and number of flights. There was also the important issue of the flight path over Belfast Lough. My concern is that those stipulations have not been well adhered to, particularly the stipulation about the use of the flight path over Belfast Lough. I expressed those concerns directly to airport management on a visit to the site only a few months ago.

Although I imagine that the travelling public would very much welcome any extension or expansion of Belfast City Airport because it is within easy access of the city centre, for a growing number of residents of south and east Belfast, there is the ongoing — and, in my view, greatly increasing — problem of the noise of the aircraft flying over very densely populated areas, and the regularity of those flights. Residents of those areas are right to be very concerned and worried about expansion plans.

It is important to note that none of the airlines, bar one, supports such an extension of the runway for the reasons outlined by the owners of the airport, who are making the application to extend it. I believe that the arguments for an extension are essentially being made for the purposes of competition, and, indeed, in some ways, monopoly. Therefore, I believe that we must think about the motivation of those who are making the proposals. Essentially, we are talking about one airline. Certainly, from my point of view, it seems that that particular airline is really looking at the rich pickings of other airlines in the region.

I wonder whether, in the longer term, Belfast City Airport is really only being used as a stepping stone to bigger business and commercial interests. Those may well be opinions, but I remain to be convinced of the wisdom or benefit of those decisions in the longer term. I support the call — primarily from the residents — for a public inquiry, because this matter is of fundamental concern to those who live in the general area, and it will remain a fundamental concern long into the future.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion, which calls for a public inquiry into a possible expansion — yet again — of Belfast City Airport. A decision to grant or refuse planning permission for an airport runway will have a significant effect on the economy and the local environment. The pros and cons must be carefully weighed up before a balanced decision is made.

A public inquiry is the best method of ensuring that the wider public is fully consulted and the public interest fully considered in reaching a decision. It would enable further evidence to be presented and allow for greater scrutiny than occurred previously in the limited pre-Christmas planning consultation.

As other Members have said, Belfast City Airport is one of only four airports in the EU that have been designated as city airports, and there is a particular directive that enables tighter restrictions to be placed on them in order to protect the local residents and communities. However, we must recognise that economic advantages would flow from an extension. It would enable the Boeing 737-800s to carry a full load, which would give access to many European destinations. Those are the planes that are specifically operated by

Ryanair, and it is demanding the runway extension to optimise their use. They are best suited to the longer European routes, but, of course, they can also be used for shorter regional routes. Ryanair is a ruthless, highly successful low-cost airline and could expand the range of its destinations from Northern Ireland. That would benefit our local travellers and bring additional tourists to Belfast and Northern Ireland, but at what cost?

Air links will be particularly important to the tourist sector, which is increasing in size as we pick up on the opportunities that were lost during the many years of terrorism. There has been no detailed assessment of whether we are talking about displacement of flights from one airport to another. That issue could be examined in a public inquiry. Ryanair is clearly the driver of the proposal. Low-budget airlines are well known for their use of secondary airports, often calling at airports further away from the ultimate destination. Is that simply a mechanism that they are using to drive down a better deal with Belfast International Airport? What exactly is going on? Why are they not using an airport further out from the city, which would allow for greater flexibility as regards landings and take-offs?

2.15 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I speak as an MLA for South Belfast. My office deals routinely with complaints about the noise emanating from low-flying aircraft flying out of Belfast City Airport. Bearing in mind the very strong, clear public-health arguments and the very strong public-safety arguments — not least because low-flying aircraft are flying over the city, over housing, and over the harbour estate, with all the combustibles that are located there — is it not disgraceful that the chief executive of Ryanair, Michael O'Leary, is reported in the 'Belfast Telegraph' as saying:

"We would like to do more and base more aircraft here and are working with Brian Ambrose of City Airport to get the runway extended. Let's get the planning permission through, and let's ignore the mewling and puking from local residents, which is a load of nonsense."

That sort of comment is a clear demonstration of the contempt that the applicant holds for the entire process. For that reason alone, we need to have a public inquiry.

Mr Beggs: I concur. Those are very unfortunate remarks, which should not have been made, and I am sure that if Michael O'Leary lived under the flight path, or close to the airport, he would not have made them.

The issue of using a particular plane is interesting. Ryanair's heavy jets are particularly noisy, and, essentially, they could displace the quiet Bombardier Q400 turboprops, which are more environmentally friendly and quieter. There is greater flexibility with regard to their size, and the plane can be matched to the demand. That is a significant issue.

The number of flights has been increasing steadily at the airport, and it is just under the critical threshold of 50,000 at which health impact statements would be required. There can be no doubt that the proposal to extend the runway for the jets would affect the whole neighbourhood, and it would be significant for Northern Ireland.

There are almost 8,000 people living within the 57-plus decibel noise level 2008 envelope. Therefore, there is clearly a need for a public inquiry, and that has been supported by Belfast City Council. I also understand that there have been almost 2,000 letters of objection.

What is the strategy for airports in Northern Ireland? Other Members have also mentioned that. Do we need to have two airports competing on exactly the same basis, or would it be wiser to have two regional airports competing for internal flights? Larger, heavier, noisier jets and long-haul and European flights should be limited to one international airport, so that it can compete head-on with Dublin Airport, where there is real competition at that level. That is something that needs to be taken into consideration. We also need to consider whether we need to impose higher environmental standards to protect the local communities that are being exposed. I support the call for a public inquiry.

Dr McDonnell: I, too, support the motion. It is not saying that we should extend the runway or that we should not extend it; it is saying that we should get all the facts before we make a decision. That is what a call for a public inquiry is — it gets all the facts on the table.

There are many claims and counterclaims. Airport management will make claims, and, like other Members who have spoken, I commend them on the efficiency and effectiveness of the operation that they run there, but that is not the issue today. The issue today is the impact that an extension of the runway would have on the lives of a number of people. There are a large number of people — not just a couple of busybodies — across south and east Belfast who feel concerned and threatened.

I welcome the many residents from south and east Belfast who are with us today in the Public Gallery, and I thank them for taking the time to be here, because it is always useful to know that the issue that we are debating here is of genuine public interest.

The proposed 1,900 foot extension to the runway at Belfast City Airport amounts to 0.4 miles, or almost a kilometre. It is quite a distance. One need only look at London: the third runway for Heathrow Airport is very controversial and the planning application very difficult.

The George Best Belfast City Airport is a great asset to Belfast; it brings significant economic and social benefits to Northern Ireland, and it is well run. However, the noise of planes taking off and landing creates a problem: it significantly disturbs the lives,

and quality of life, of thousands of people who live under the flight pathway. The negative effects are made clear to me from my contact with hundreds of constituents from day to day and week to week.

Things could be done to ameliorate the situation. I have a sense that, over the past month or six weeks, things have been done to alleviate the situation. More planes take off over the lough. Perhaps I am a bit dopey, but in my estimation fewer planes take off and land over Belfast; those taking off and landing come in and leave higher so that the threat of a plane flying low just over the rooftops seems to have been eliminated recently. I cannot help wondering why.

Another issue of growing concern, particularly among residents, is the timing of the application. The contract with Ryanair was signed despite its aircraft being too big for the present runway. This application was made, despite the fact that the contracts were signed with the two limitations. Ryanair 737 jets are much noisier, tend to fly in lower and tend not to observe the strict conditions that other airlines observe. As someone said to me the other day, they sound more like tractors than motorcars. They come in with louder, deeper noise, which is much more penetrating and disruptive than, for instance, British Midland flights.

Let me make it crystal clear: I support the call for a public inquiry into this application. A public inquiry is not a decision; however, it will give everyone affected the space to have a frank, open and honest discussion and examination of all the factors: business interests, the demand and need for the airport, and the health and environmental implications as well. It would benefit all concerned, and I urge the Minister to recognise that. The issue, like that of the third runway at Heathrow, is about striking a balance between commercial use and the needs of communities and the environment. It is not an easy task, but it is a vital one.

Although not of immediate concern, there is a need for a regional aviation strategy and to integrate whatever is decided in this regard into our overall regional development strategy.

Mr McCausland: I support the motion and the amendment. There should be a public inquiry into the proposal to extend the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport. It is one of only two EU-designated city airports in the United Kingdom; the other is London City Airport. Belfast City Airport is right in the heart of the city. Aircraft arriving or taking off from the city airport have a significant effect on the quality of life of many thousands of people living in east Belfast. Belfast International Airport, however, is located in a sparsely occupied area and can, in contrast, operate 24 hours a day. A proposal has been made to alter the city airport and to increase the runway by 30% or 590

metres — almost 2,000 feet. A proposal of such magnitude needs very careful consideration.

When such a change is made, there can be no going back; there will not be a reduction in years to come. That is why some of the arguments that have been put forward in favour of the expansion of the runway do not stack up. In some of the material, I have seen references to the credit crunch, the economic climate and the need for jobs, and that, therefore, the runway should be expanded. However, in five or 10 years, when the economic situation is very different from that of today, the expanded runway will still be there.

Mr Weir: I agree with the Member, and I think that one of the problems is that this issue has been looked at with a very short-termist attitude. A genuine concern has been raised about the intention of a particular airline. Does the Member accept that we need to look at the matter in the long term? The runway is going to be here in 30 or 50 years, and what one particular airline does in the next year or two will pale into insignificance in the long term. There is a flipside to the coin; the long-term situation has to be looked at, rather than indulging in too much short-termism.

Mr McCausland: There are two ways of looking at many things. I intend to come to the long-term view in due course, and I think that it presents an argument in favour of, rather than against, a public inquiry.

Many of the arguments that Belfast City Airport has put forward do not concern planning issues; it lists economic benefits, job creation, tourism — all commercial issues. Those are not planning issues; rather, they are the economic arguments that are being put forward for permitting the expansion without a public inquiry.

I note the figures that Belfast City Airport has put forward for an increase in the number of people arriving and an increase in the number of jobs. However, I am not convinced that that overrides the case for a public inquiry. The implication is that, without an extension of the runway at Belfast City Airport, we will not see a growth in the number of tourists coming to Northern Ireland or in the number of jobs associated with those tourists arriving. That is certainly not the case. I am in favour of increasing the number of tourists that come to Belfast. I am passionate in my view that tourism is one of the major growth areas for the economy and for employment in the city. Tourism has increased considerably, and it will continue to be one of the growth areas; however, that is not an argument for extending the runway.

It is not as though there is no alternative. We have Belfast International Airport, and there is the potential for growth in the number of flights in and out of it. As regards access to Northern Ireland for tourists, the two airports should not be competing — and this is where I

come to the long-term view — they should complement each other.

I note that Belfast International Airport has called for a regional aviation policy, and I favour such a policy. Belfast City Airport refers to a 2003 White Paper which was produced by the Department for Transport for the whole of the United Kingdom. Although that White Paper set out the views for a 30-year period, over the last five years or so there has been a significant change in the needs of Northern Ireland and in what is considered to be appropriate provision for Northern Ireland. Given that we have a devolved Assembly, we should be looking at some way of bringing forward a regional aviation policy for Northern Ireland.

When one compares and contrasts the cases put forward by Belfast City Airport, local residents, Belfast International Airport, and the various airlines that use Belfast City Airport, it is clear that this is a complex issue. The airlines themselves are divided on the issue of extending the runway — Ryanair demands it, but BMI does not need it, and Flybe opposes it. If there is not a uniform view among the airlines, and if some of those airlines are not convinced about the extension, is the case really that strong?

Due to the complexity of the arguments — and the arguments presented to us in the various papers are complex — I think that there is a clear case for a public inquiry. I hope that there is one, and I would certainly support it. I know that the people living in east Belfast who are concerned about the runway believe that that is the best way forward. We have to give due cognisance to the concerns of those people who are directly affected. We have a responsibility to look after the interests of folk, particularly if they are affected in that way. To the many people who say that they want the runway extended, I ask: would you want to live beside it?

Mr McClarty: It has been said on a number of occasions this afternoon, that Belfast City Airport is one of four designated city airports in Europe.

City airports are, of course, unique in that they are situated in urban settings, which are surrounded by a high density of people. It follows, therefore, that city airports should have stricter guidelines with regard to the number of flights and the levels of noise and pollution. It also means that any proposals for city airports should be given as much consideration as possible. That is why my colleagues and I support the motion.

2.30 pm

Of course, there are potential economic benefits — a blind man on a galloping horse could see that. However, those must be fully weighed against the potential costs to local residents, possible increases in noise and pollution levels, and what the extension will

mean in the medium and long term. The environmental impact of the proposed extension must also be given due consideration, especially with regard to our wider environmental commitments.

Indeed, one could argue that the improvement of rail links to our airports should be given at least equal consideration as any extensions. A more strategic framework is needed in which to develop the travel and tourism infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Currently, there is a lack of vision in that area, which means that that and other tourism, economic and environmental decisions can take place in a vacuum. As we heard in this morning's debate, we need to become more strategic when it comes to our visions for the future.

A public inquiry should also consider the ramifications that the development of the runway may have on the planning agreement between the airport and the Department of the Environment. No changes to the planning agreement will occur under the present proposals, but what potential changes could the extension facilitate in the future, and what ramifications might that have on local residents and on Belfast City Airport's status as a city airport? A public inquiry is the best way to ensure that an objective decision is made in the best interests of everyone who has a stake in the decision. I support the motion.

Lord Browne: When dealing with any planning application, it is essential that all the accurate information that is available at the time is considered very carefully before an informed decision is made. I am confident that the planners and the Minister will weigh up all the facts before reaching a conclusion.

The main reason that the management at George Best Belfast City Airport has given for extending the runway is that it will facilitate flights to a wider range of European destinations and ensure fuel and passenger efficiencies for the aircraft. The chief executive of the airport has stated that the extension to the runway will not entail extra flights, because the air traffic movements through the airport are governed by a separate planning agreement.

The airport's management have also stated that due to the physical limitations of the existing runway and the proposed extension, no wide-bodied aircraft will be permitted to use the airport and that only narrow-bodied aircraft with one aisle will, as at present, be able to use the airport. It is worth noting that, although it is proposed to extend the runway by approximately 600 metres, there is a proposal to reduce the south-east end of the runway by some 150 metres to the north-east.

I understand that the airport's operating hours are also governed by the planning agreement, and that that will not change as a result of the runway extension. The George Best Belfast City Airport is the second largest employer in east Belfast, employing more than

1,400 people, and it has a significant impact on economic growth. However, although we should do everything possible to ensure economic growth, many other factors have to be considered. Those include the air quality, the odour impact, the archaeological impact, contamination, ground conditions and the drainage and water quality. The noise of the aircraft and of the additional road traffic are also factors.

It is also important to take into consideration the effect of a runway extension on communities in east and south Belfast and north Down. Their main concern is health and safety. Full consideration must be given to their fears and apprehensions: noise pollution, implications for schools in the area, and possible increased health risks. Local communities may have other fears as well.

As with the argument for the runway extension, the Assembly must ask the Minister to take note of the concerns of both the business community and local residents on any proposed runway extension at George Best Belfast City Airport.

Mr Burns: I support the motion. I must declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, which has objected formally to the planning application because Belfast International Airport is located within the council's boundaries. I support the call for a public inquiry into the extension of the runway at Belfast City Airport. It is not just another planning application; it is a complex issue that is not as simple as it might seem. All information must be examined fully in an open, article 31 public inquiry.

Who wants the extension? As far as I know, only Ryanair wants it. BMI says that it does not need it, and Flybe does not want it. Local councils, including Belfast City Council, also oppose those plans.

Mr Cree: The Member refers to 'Belfast City Airport Watch', which states that four councils oppose the extension. That is inaccurate; North Down Borough Council is not against the extension. I know that because I am the mayor.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burns: No. The councils that I mentioned are Belfast City Council and Antrim Borough Council. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members must direct all their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Burns: George Best Belfast City Airport was never intended to be anything other than a city airport — a city hub; it should not grow into an international airport. It can never grow into a true international airport because of its location and because there is already an international airport only 20 miles away.

Dublin is a much bigger city than Belfast, yet it has only one airport and air-traffic infrastructure. Belfast airports pay twice for air-traffic control, security, and for fire-and-rescue services, which costs them a great deal of money. The fact that Dublin Airport has no near rival helps it to grow — it is one of the fastest growing in Europe — it has received high levels of investment and is a great success. However, it must also be said that it has taken business away from both Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport.

People usually say that competition — two rival airports fighting for customers — is a good thing. I agree that it is a good thing in theory. However, at present, and for some time to come, there will be an oversupply of flights. Flying capacity is not being used. Competition between Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport for London air traffic is a good example of that waste. We do not make the most of what we have. At present, more capacity is not needed. In the long term, it would be better for different carriers to compete at the same airport.

Much of the growth at Belfast City Airport is not environmentally friendly either in the short or long term. A bigger runway means bigger planes and more flights. If the extension goes ahead, the quality of life of the people of east and south Belfast will be badly affected by increased noise. It is a built-up area, and, therefore, a lot of people will be affected.

Belfast International Airport has the potential for growth, and fewer people would be badly affected by expansion at that airport. There would be no noise issues, no crosswinds, no bird issues, and night flights would be allowed. Indeed, Belfast International Airport already has two runways. We could encourage investment in Belfast International Airport and leave George Best Belfast City Airport as it is. It would be much better to build a railway link to Belfast International Airport, a Templepatrick bypass, and make the road between Templepatrick and the airport a dual carriageway.

The expansion of Belfast City Airport would not be good for the economy, the environment or the people of east and south Belfast. I repeat my call for a public inquiry into the extension of the runway so that the issues that I have outlined can be assessed in detail.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. The motion is clear in calling for an inquiry into article 31 of the Planning Order 1991 in relation to the application to extend the runway at Belfast City Airport. That will enable the economic and environmental arguments to be studied, which is the correct course of action.

I speak as someone who believes that tourism is very important to the economy in the North. It has been estimated that the extension could create 100 jobs

at the airport and attract about £120 million to the economy. Belfast alone accounts for 1,700 jobs in the tourism infrastructure.

Therefore, it is a very important issue about which we receive letters and will receive lobbying. The photographs in the 'Belfast City Airport Watch' document show just how close aeroplanes fly to the roofs of people's homes. We must all ask ourselves whether a runway extension is the right thing to do, because the airport is in a built-up area.

I have addressed the motion's reference to economic issues, but there are also environmental issues. Extension of the runway would have an immense adverse effect on the population of east Belfast and the surrounding area. Detrimental impacts such as noise pollution, aircraft emissions, traffic congestion and the disturbance of natural habitats will all be increased if the runway extension goes ahead. Noise pollution alone, for example, would undoubtedly increase, because flight paths to Belfast City Airport pass over a wide swathe of residential housing in south and east Belfast.

I must point out that we are all taking this issue very seriously. I hope that the Minister is listening somewhere else, because I note that he is not in the Chamber. I hope, therefore, that he is listening to the debate and taking the issue as seriously as the rest of us, because it is very important. However, the fact that many flights pass over —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: I will, certainly.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. It should be placed on record — for the benefit of the Member and others — that the Minister is not here because he has to make the equivalent of a judicial decision on whether to grant a public inquiry. That is the reason for his absence from the Chamber. This is an issue in which, clearly, the Minister would be very interested, but his hands are, effectively, tied. That is why he is not even in a position to respond to the debate and why it is probably not appropriate for him to be in the Chamber. However, the Minister's absence is not due to any lack of interest on his part.

Mr P Maskey: I was simply saying that I hope that the Minister is listening to the debate very carefully, because it is of great importance to not only Belfast but to the entire economy. Therefore, I appreciate the Member's remarks and thank him for the intervention.

2.45 pm

The aircraft noise that take-offs, landings, taxiing and engine-testing cause is an important issue for communities that live near airports and under flight paths. The European Commission's findings on noise pollution at airports show that living near an airport can increase the risk of coronary heart disease and

stroke, because increased blood pressure from noise pollution can exacerbate the risk of developing those illnesses. The European Commission estimates that 20% of Europe's population — roughly 80 million people — are exposed to airport noise levels that it considers unhealthy and unacceptable. If the runway at Belfast City Airport is extended, that figure will increase.

Aircraft and airport vehicles emit a number of pollutants, particularly nitrogen dioxide and fine particles — PM10. Those have a proven detrimental effect on health and the environment. Belfast City Airport lies at the mouth of a natural valley, and in my constituency of West Belfast, a brown smog-like haze gathers on the Upper Springfield Road on mornings when there are high-pressure weather systems. As such, increased emissions would add to that local problem, and it would be greater in other areas.

Members often drive to the Assembly in the mornings and drive home again in the evenings, and we see traffic congestion on the roads. A runway extension would add to that congestion, which would affect the local community in the Belfast area, especially in east Belfast. The airport construction could also deprive local plant and animal species of their habitat. Victoria Park, which is located beside the airport, is not only for leisure use but is a site where migrating birds and other species thrive. The mudflats and artificial lagoons provide valuable feeding grounds for wading birds and wildfowl.

We must appreciate the human issues and as I pointed out earlier, acknowledge how close the airport is to people's houses, as the photographs from the watchtower at Belfast City Airport highlight. We all use airports from time to time, and we hear the noise. I would not fancy living underneath a flight path or beside an airport, so it is important that we take the issue of the proposed runway extension seriously. I support the motion. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Weir: Like many of my constituents in North Down, I have mixed views on the airport. It is important to acknowledge that fact. I concur with the remarks that the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, made: Michael O'Leary's remarks are offensive, and I do not believe that Ryanair is doing Belfast City Airport any favours.

As the proposer of the motion said, thousands of people are forced to endure Belfast City Airport. However, the flip side of the coin has not been highlighted much during the debate. Thousands of people, particularly in north Down and east Belfast, are forced to enjoy the benefits of the airport, and it is important to place that on record. The airport provides employment for around 1,500 people, including my constituents and those from nearby constituencies. It adds economic benefit to the locality and increases

consumer choice. Moreover, it offers commuter convenience to many people in my constituency and the surrounding areas, because they have an airport close to their location.

Although there has been a tendency to sneer at budget airlines during the debate, in many cases they provide opportunities for flights at a cost that is within people's reach. Not everyone receives an MLA's salary, and people should have the opportunity to fly.

I welcome the amendment and am happy to support an amended motion on the basis that it reflects the clear majority opinion in the House that a public inquiry should be held. We face two issues — one of process and one of end result. I am somewhat dubious about the merits of a public inquiry, because its idea is to uncover additional information. The competing sides have been almost smothered in a welter of information. It seems that there is little information that is not in the public domain. I question the extent to which new information will become available.

However, if a public inquiry were to bring forward new and additional information, it would be worthwhile. If, on the other hand, the motivation is simply to provide some sort of delaying tactic, then that is not a proper use of a public inquiry.

There are some people — particularly in the Green Party — who would probably like there to be no airports at all and who tend to view an aircraft as some sort of evil silver beast in the sky. The proposer of the motion demonstrated his level of knowledge of airports when he said that one of the problems might be that businessmen queuing for one flight would get caught up in a long queue of holidaymakers going to Malaga. I know that Mr Wilson does not fly — and as far as I know he has never flown in his life — but perhaps he should know that there are different check-in desks for different destinations. That shows a general level of ignorance regarding air transport.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am conscious that my colleague Mr Wilson is not here, and I am not seeking to defend the general point that has been made, but does the Member recognise that Flybe, which does know something about running airlines, has made the point that it fears that the runway extension will change the character of Belfast City Airport? Flybe also fears that the extension will undermine its business model by interfering with the way it does business and interfering with the type of airport that it wishes to use for the service it provides for commuter traffic within the UK.

Mr Weir: There are differing views — and I am glad that the Member did not try to defend the ignorance of his colleague. Much of the rights and wrongs of the issue have been bandied around; the economic arguments, and the potential inflow of jobs

and money via the runway extension. Indeed, taking the contrary view; much has been said about the impact on Belfast International Airport. As for the question of whether the runway extension will lead to some level of displacement, either from Belfast International Airport or Dublin Airport, the answer is yes, it probably will — but that is what is called economic competition. We want to see a level playing field — a level landing field, perhaps — for the airport.

There will be some level of displacement if one considers the short-term impact; however, over the past 10 years the number of people using Belfast International Airport has doubled, as has the number of people using Belfast City Airport. That suggests, at least in the long term, that competition is actually good for both airports.

Whether one is for or against the runway extension from the economic point of view — and I agree that we should be considering a Northern Ireland strategy for air transport separately — for people to hang their hats on the economic impact may be a red herring. As far as I am aware, a public inquiry would largely, if not exclusively, concentrate on planning issues, which was pointed out by Nelson McCausland, who pooh-poohed the potential economic advantages but felt that the potential economic problems that might arise should become material considerations. There must be a level playing field, and the case must be made on that basis.

A decision should be made on the issue, whether through a planning inquiry or ministerial decision. Such a decision must be made on the basis of promoting economic competition rather than economic protectionism, and it should not be based on the Luddite view of restraining one airport. From the environmental point of view, a public inquiry would not investigate the number of flights involved, the time, or the route. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Ms Purvis: I support the motion. Although it is more watered down than the one that was tabled a few weeks ago, today's motion also calls for a public inquiry, which is the critical next step that must be taken to properly address Belfast City Airport's planning application to extend its runway.

A number of Members have outlined the legal, environmental and economic aspects of the debate. The DUP is not usually known for sitting on the fence, but today its Members seemed to be setting out the case in defence of the airport and then setting out the case of the residents. I will focus on the human costs of the runway extension. In the past few years, as the noise generated by Belfast City Airport has increased, so have the complaints received from local residents by the Progressive Union Party's office. Many residents of east and south Belfast and north Down are impacted by the noise.

The residents of Connswater Grove and Connswater Mews are particularly affected, because those streets are located at the lowest point of the flight path.

Residents of social housing in those areas have only single glazing in their homes. That was not due for review until 2013; fortunately, the Minister for Social Development and Connswater Homes brought that review forward by two years. Nevertheless, those residents are tortured by aircraft noise now. The City Airport's own monitoring systems documented a dramatic rise in the number of residents that were affected by increased noise at the airport. A report that was released last autumn revealed that the number of people who lived within a noise contour of 63 Leq had risen by 29%. Overall, there was a 122% increase in the number of people that were affected by aircraft noise. The DOE prohibits airports from exceeding that threshold, even though UK legislation recognises that the onset of significant nuisance from noise is set at 57 Leq.

To put that in context, it is worth remembering that Belfast Harbour Airport, as it was, only got permission to expand its accommodation for commercial aircraft in 1983. In the subsequent 26 years, the neighbourhoods that have long surrounded those old airfields have adapted to various changes. However, as George Best Belfast City Airport's own noise reports demonstrate, the arrival of larger and heavier aircraft in recent years has had a profound effect on residents' quality of life. Large Airbus and Boeing aircraft now make up more than 25% of the flights in and out of the City Airport.

I ask Members to think about the disturbances from those massive machines — not fears, as Lord Browne suggested, but very real disturbances: conversations halted, school lessons paused, backyard barbecues interrupted and children woken from their sleep. As other Members said, people's health is affected. That is just from noise pollution; the effect on air quality requires further investigation.

The City Airport claims to adhere to European restrictions on urban airports by preventing flights after 9.30 pm. Last year, however, more than 500 flights broke that deadline with no consequence. The airport recently announced that it would fine airlines for breaking the curfew — starting at a massive £50. Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Washington DC imposes a fine of \$5,000, and Mineta San José Airport in California imposes a fine of \$2,500.

George Best Belfast City Airport and its officials have not lived up to their responsibilities as an enterprise that is doing business in a local community. Its neighbours are not happy, because people are suffering under the noise. I understand that there is not much public sympathy for those who live under the flight path. However, those who are unsympathetic do not live there nor do they have to suffer the noise that

residents suffer. The residents have asked for remedies, but have been met with very little empathy or understanding by airport officials. Their attitude towards local residents and others who have expressed concerns about noise levels is insensitive at best. George Best Belfast City Airport should deal with the current noise issue before adding any more.

Airports and air travel play an important role in our economy and in our lives. However, the issue is one of balancing the commercial needs of travellers with the quality of life of local residents, with the full awareness that local residents have to live with the consequences of the decisions every day.

Mr T Clarke: I support the motion and the amendment. The decision to expand the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport is a significant one, and I support all the calls for a inquiry. Such an inquiry would allow us fully to investigate the economic case that has been made by the airport and Ryanair and to determine whether it is necessary for Belfast and Northern Ireland to have the extended runway.

I welcome a public inquiry because the economic argument does not stack up, and an extension to the runway at the City Airport would not necessarily increase our economic well-being. In fact, it would be detrimental. We must have a single international airport with a high footfall that is necessary to achieve the critical mass of travellers that will attract more airlines and routes to the Province.

3.00 pm

George Best Belfast City Airport, through its proposed expansion, is trying to compete with Aldergrove for the title of international airport. Having two international airports that divide footfall will mean that both airports and Northern Ireland, as a whole, will lose out.

Recently, the House of Commons voted on the proposed expansion of Heathrow Airport. The House supported the motion as it recognised the importance of having a main hub airport. Alternatives proposed to alleviate pressure on Heathrow Airport, such as expanding Gatwick Airport, Stansted Airport or other airports, were rejected because they undermined the importance of Heathrow as a hub airport. We must follow the lead of the House Commons and not make the mistake of allowing Belfast City Airport to expand at the expense of Belfast International Airport.

Unfortunately, the Minister for Regional Development has done little to improve transport links to Belfast International Airport. Indeed, there needs to be a rail link to that airport so that we can improve its attractiveness and so that it can attract more routes, which, subsequently, will bring more business and investment to Northern Ireland.

Belfast City Airport has an important purpose in Northern Ireland's aviation, because it serves business travellers and offers short-haul flights. However, it is not an international airport and we should not try to make it one. It is important that we in Northern Ireland are properly connected to the rest of the world, and it is important for the economy that we have good transport and aviation links. A situation in which two airports are competing for the status of Northern Ireland's top airport, however, does us no good.

Both Belfast airports serve distinctive purposes — Belfast International Airport is an international airport and George Best Belfast City Airport is a city airport. We should not seek to change that, but we should seek to enhance those identities. I support the call for a public inquiry.

Mr G Robinson: I support the motion and the amendment. It is interesting to note that the airlines that currently use the George Best Belfast City Airport are divided over whether the runway extension is a necessity. If airlines are not in agreement about the requirements of the travelling public, caution should be exercised in decisions of this nature. A public inquiry is the sensible way in which to ensure that all aspects of the application are scrutinised and that the final decision is based on hard evidence.

This case has many aspects. The most obvious one being the increased disturbance that residents who live under the flight path have experienced since the introduction of larger jet aircraft on routes to and from Belfast City Airport. In my constituency, the increased usage of jet aircraft at Eglinton is noticeable.

I applaud Flybe for its great efforts to use aircraft that are fuel efficient and quieter. Figures show that Flybe is one of the few carriers that has increased its passenger numbers in what is a difficult economic climate. Passengers obviously seem to think that Flybe has got it right commercially. Therefore, has it also got it right with regard to the runway extension? The best way to test that is via a public inquiry. I hope that Members agree with that point and that they support the amendment.

I remind Members that Northern Ireland has three airports. As I mentioned earlier, there is also one at Eglinton. It has already extended its runway, and we are all aware of the controversy that surrounded that decision. I encourage airlines not to forget that third airport, and I assure them that they would receive a warm welcome if they start to operate services from there. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Ross: The First Minister outlined the necessity for the DUP's amendment before this debate began today. Given that the original motion would have put the Minister of the Environment in a difficult position, our amendment allows the Minister to recognise the

mood of the House on this issue, without forcing him to take one decision or another. The amendment will also unite the House.

Given the geographical location of the Province, the future of both air and sea transport is clearly an important issue and one which is of major significance to Northern Ireland. Members bore out the economic and tourism reasons for that in their contributions. I do not think that too many Members will argue against the fact that we need better routes to mainland Europe and beyond, perhaps with the exception of the Green Party, which takes a stance against aviation in most things that it says.

Members' contributions make it clear that this is a divisive issue, with strong arguments both for and against the extension of the runway. We have heard many times that George Best Belfast City Airport operates under fairly significant restraints that are recognised in the Government's White Paper 'The Future of Air Transport' — most notably, about the length of the runway. A longer runway, as Members have heard, would allow aircraft to carry more fuel and to fly further. Lord Browne articulated that view.

Tommy Burns talked about more flights. However, I do not think that that is really the case, because the number of flights is capped; therefore, extending the runway would have a minimal impact in that regard. Paul Maskey's concern about additional traffic is genuine, but we are talking about a minimal increase in the amount of traffic.

The Member of Parliament for South Belfast, Alasdair McDonnell, talked about the fact that the issue is finely balanced and that — similar to a recent debate in the House of Commons about the third runway at Heathrow — representatives from each constituency will hold different views. We have seen that during the debate. There are clearly those in the House who place weight on the need for further economic and social development, while others are concerned about the environmental aspect and the impact on the local community.

Other Members stated that Belfast International Airport, rather than the City Airport, should be the focus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that view was held by Members for South Antrim, such as Tommy Burns, my colleague Trevor Clarke and Rev McCrea.

Brian Wilson said that he personally opposed any expansion, but that the motion's main purpose was to ensure that all sides of the argument were heard, and considered, in a public inquiry. He specifically mentioned the possible economic benefits, and the potential impact on Belfast International Airport through job displacement, as well as the environmental impact and the effect on local residents.

Mr T Clarke: The Member made a point about the difference between the two airports; does he accept

that the International Airport is much safer for planes, because it is not in such a built-up area?

Mr Ross: I believe that that comment has been made by other Members. I am not sure that the current City Airport is unsafe, and I certainly do not think that that is what the Member implied.

To go back to comments made by other Members in the debate, I, like Peter Weir, am unconvinced by Brian Wilson's argument that an extension will lead to business users and holidaymakers queuing up together. I do not believe that that will be the case at all.

Proposing the amendment, Jimmy Spratt talked of the importance of the business community to the City Airport. He also spoke of the importance of addressing all the issues, and of the Minister hearing those issues. Mr Spratt mentioned some of the potential environmental impacts.

Alex Maskey's contribution included support for a public inquiry. Our amendment does not say that there should not be one. Rather, we put the onus on the Minister to ultimately make that decision. Alex Maskey talked about the city status of the airport, as did Roy Beggs, who also talked about the tourist potential and the possible benefits of extending the runway.

Michael McGimpsey intervened in the debate to say that the remarks by the chief executive of Ryanair were very unhelpful. I agree with that. It was very unhelpful and regrettable that he treated people with such disdain.

On balance, I believe that the mood of the House will be considered by the Minister, and I think that the majority of people do, perhaps, want a public inquiry. Our amendment allows the Minister to recognise those views, and to make that decision. I hope that the Alliance Party and the Green Party will accept the amendment, and that the rest of the House will unite around that.

Dr Farry: I want to be clear at the outset that our motion is about the process involved in taking a decision. A public inquiry must be held to take that process forward, and to properly test all of the economic and environmental arguments. As Alasdair McDonnell said, it is about ensuring that all the facts are on the table.

I am open-minded about the outcome of an inquiry. I am not going into the process with any closed mind, because that would almost contradict the call for a public inquiry. At this stage, the process is the important aspect.

I am no expert on all the environmental issues, although I have strong opinions on some of the economic aspects. The important thing is that we test those issues in a rigorous, open and transparent framework. The outcome of that process is something in which the whole community in Northern Ireland should have confidence.

The call for a public inquiry is not meant to cause an arbitrary delay to the runway extension. Instead, it is about ensuring that there is an open and transparent process — I want to give that reassurance, particularly to the airport, lest there are any accusations of ulterior motives behind the motion. I believe that we are reflecting the views of a large number of our constituents, particularly those in the greater Belfast area.

When we tabled the motion, we understood that the Minister would not be present at the debate. We proceeded in that knowledge, because we felt that it was important that the issues are addressed. We are drawing no negative conclusions from the absence of the Minister, and, if anything, we understand his position and that he cannot make direct comment on the issue to the Assembly today in advance of him making a decision.

Like any private Members' motion, our motion is non-binding. Therefore, in the sense that we are calling on the Minister, that call is the view of the Assembly. It is not necessarily a direct instruction to the Minister, because, perhaps sadly, Back-Bench motions do not carry huge weight with Ministers — they can regard or disregard them at their will. Nonetheless, we will proceed regardless to give our views.

I am agnostic about the amendment, and I appreciate that there are a range of views in the DUP on what should happen with regard to a public inquiry. We are prepared to accept the amendment in the interests of pragmatism and trying to find a common front in the Chamber and in sending a common message to the Minister and the wider community. The amendment does not say that the Minister should take note of the various views expressed by individual Members. Instead, it calls for the Minister to take note of the view — a single view — of the Assembly, that there should be an inquiry — and “should” is the operative word. There is a clear sense of direction in the amendment on what should happen in the interests of transparency. As Danny Kennedy said, perhaps my agnosticism has been resolved, and I am now a true believer. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: A quick conversion. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Farry: At times, we do move fast in the Alliance Party. If the amendment allows the DUP to come on board, that is of some value.

The development of airports is not a simple and straightforward matter — it is not simply about putting down a few hundred more metres of concrete on a piece of ground, and it is not a supermarket opening. This is something of major strategic importance to our society and, in particular, to the economy. Elsewhere, there has been controversy about the third runway at Heathrow and the potential expansion of Stansted Airport. Although we cannot, perhaps, draw direct

comparisons with those examples, because we are doing something different, they show that such issues are not to be taken lightly and proper consideration of everything is needed. As MLAs, we have a duty to take into account the views of the public in Northern Ireland.

Ms Lo: Does the Member agree that the extension of the runway is such a permanent feature and that is why residents are so fearful? Current limitations on flight numbers, and the size and noise of aircrafts can be changed once the extension is made permanent.

Dr Farry: I agree entirely with my colleague's remarks, which was a point that was, I believe, made by Nelson McCausland earlier as well.

I take note of Michael McGimpsey's comments on very scurrilous remarks made by Michael O'Leary about our constituents — it is important that we respect the views of people, because, after all, they put us here.

There is support for a public inquiry from councils across Northern Ireland, and I want to correct the record about North Down Borough Council, about which I, too, know something. The council agreed in July 2008 to support a public inquiry, but we may have slipped that under our mayor's radar at the time. Hopefully, the Assembly will follow suit.

Roy Beggs emphasised the importance of the matter with regard to the wider public interest. The public interest refers to ensuring that our actions are not sectional, economic or otherwise, but are for the good of society overall.

3.15 pm

As an individual, I certainly support and use the airport. I also recognise the particular role and function that it plays in Northern Ireland. A large number of people are quite satisfied with the airport's role and function. Equally, the point could be made that there is scope for the airport to expand and to grow its business without extending its runway. It is important to put that in context.

There must be a trade-off between competing economic and environmental aspects. Jimmy Spratt very clearly highlighted that issue at the start of the debate. The essential question with which we must wrestle is whether we wish to compromise on noise and the environmental impact of the extension in order for the economy to benefit.

A number of speakers — notably Alex Maskey, Paul Maskey, Wallace Browne and Dawn Purvis — drew attention to the very direct impacts that planes have on neighbourhoods. Given that I lived in the Kinnegar area of Holywood for a year, I have had personal experience of that issue. Some people are sceptical of the airport's community fund. It is almost like a fine box — airlines can go ahead and bring flights in late

and will only have to pay a few pounds into a box as a consequence. It is not a real disincentive.

In a very simplistic sense, one could argue that we should go ahead and expand the airport as it brings in more business and tourists and that we should let things grow in an unregulated manner. However, we need to be a little bit more sophisticated than that. People have pointed to the need for an aviation strategy for Northern Ireland. It is a real shame that we do not have one in place. Brian Wilson, Nelson McCausland and Alasdair McDonnell — and George Robinson, at the end of the debate — referred to taking a third airport into account.

We must also consider the issue of competition and what we mean by that. Are we talking about two international airports for a city the size of Belfast? Is that what we mean by competition, or is it better to talk about having two specialist airports, one to deal with international traffic and the other to deal with UK traffic? The airport that deals with the UK traffic could have more direct and efficient access to the city centre. If one takes Dublin Airport into account, perhaps true competition is achieved on an all-island basis. It is interesting to note that the Irish Government have heavily invested in Dublin Airport. Rather than spreading things out among a number of different airports across the country, they have bulked up Dublin Airport, so they have taken a very clear and strategic direction.

Some Members made the point that the existing runway capacity is more than sufficient for Northern Ireland to deal with any estimate of the growth of the number of flights. Perhaps the balance of that is that we should invest in more efficient transport links to Belfast International Airport. That airport is an existing resource, and it could be expanded without compromising on environmental and noise considerations and the impact on local residents.

In addition, we must also note the views of the airlines. A lot of points were made about the proposals being driven forward by Ryanair, and, perhaps, by Belfast City Airport shareholders for their own narrow financial interests. However, we must note that BMI is, at best, neutral on the proposals; whereas Flybe — which is the main user of the airport and built up the airport over the past number of years — is opposed to the plans and is lobbying against the runway extension. Flybe would make the point that it wants the airport's character to stay as it is because that is the most appropriate character and it fits the Flybe business model. David McClarty made the point that the George Best Belfast City Airport is one of the few airports to have the EU designation of being a city airport. Clearly, that is a very strong hint about how the matter is being played.

We have had a reasonably good debate today. A lot of constructive points were made by Members. We have aired a number of the issues, and most people

have approached the topic in a very mature manner. We have open minds, but the most important issue is to put in place a proper process to ensure that decisions are taken in an open and transparent manner and that we have a robust debate with all the facts being placed on the table.

I support the motion and the amendment.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 55; Noes 26.

AYES

Ms Anderson, 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, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, 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 B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Ross and Mr Spratt.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Burns and Mr Kennedy.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to take note of the view of this Assembly that there should be a public inquiry under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 in relation to the application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport, in order to properly test all of the relevant economic and environmental arguments.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Wrightbus

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

Mr Paisley Jnr: Wrightbus, the international bus manufacturer, is one of Northern Ireland's most well established family-run businesses. Indeed, it is a third generation business. Unfortunately, today it announced 235 redundancies.

The Wrightbus brand is known across the world: it is known for its London double-deckers on the mainland; for its Ulsterbus vehicles here; and, in Hong Kong, for the Goldliner. It is a major employer and manufacturer, which provides skilled employment for many in Northern Ireland.

The jobs losses that were announced today will mean a loss of some £6 million in our local wage bill. That will have a significant — in fact, crippling — impact on such towns as Ballymena and on many other towns and businesses in County Antrim. Many engineering businesses in County Antrim supplied Wrightbus. Tonight, those companies will be in turmoil, because of what those job losses will mean for them.

The recession will be no respecter of jobs, standing or ability; its ravages will strike anywhere. This House must send out a message of solidarity to the many people in Northern Ireland who will not have a job after today. Those people will feel lost and all at sea; they will not know what the future holds for them.

If devolution is to mean anything, the Assembly will have to take a practical stand on these issues. In a statement released this afternoon Wrightbus representatives said that they would like the Executive and the Assembly do all that they can to help. That means that they want assistance with knocking on doors for other international contracts and with the reskilling and retraining of those who will become unemployed as a result of today's announcement.

Wrightbus runs a remarkable apprenticeship scheme, which should be supported at this critical time. I have spoken to Arlene Foster and Sir Reg Empey, who said that they will do all that they can to help those affected.

They will stand shoulder to shoulder with those people who were part of a productive and lucrative workforce, but who are now staring into recession.

I hope that the Assembly will stand with us, support us and help County Antrim as it goes through this terrible problem.

Mr O’Loan: I give my assent to every word that Mr Paisley Jnr said about today’s most unfortunate announcement regarding a consultation period of 90 days in relation to the likely loss of 235 jobs in Wrightbus. The company employs more than 1,000 people, so it is a drastic announcement.

The effects are felt throughout the company because a selection process has to happen, and many workers will be asking themselves whether they will lose their job. The effects of the selection process on the income of those workers will be great. Gone are the days when they could easily have got a job elsewhere because everyone knows that job opportunities are now few and far between.

The job losses will have a considerable effect on local suppliers. Wrightbus spread its search for supplies in the local area, which provided a tremendous economic boost for that area.

The news from such a successful and innovative company will come as a shock to the manufacturing sector. Companies have to respond when their order books are reduced, and that is what is happening in the current international economic environment.

Unfortunately, we will hear more such announcements. It creates an imperative for the Assembly, and I strongly support Mr Paisley Jnr’s comments in that regard. The company is seeking support from the Assembly for investment in research and development and for apprenticeship training.

We should listen to the message from Wrightbus, which is speaking for the whole manufacturing sector. My party will be saying a lot more in forthcoming days about measures that the Assembly can adopt and the funding package that will accompany those.

Mr Storey: Today’s announcement, which is the reason why we have had to come to the Chamber today, is another reality check for us all about the economic uncertainty and challenges that face us. It is clear from the announcement by Wrightbus that there are no bounds to the economic challenges that we face or the ways in which the economic downturn can affect us all. Wrightbus has been the linchpin of the economic prosperity of Ballymena and North Antrim for a considerable number of years.

My colleague Ian Paisley Jnr rightly referred not only to the excellent workforce that we have in Ballymena and the issue around the apprenticeships schemes, the leadership skills and the skills base that

that company has developed over many years, but to those other subcontractors — the smaller, yet vitally important, engineering companies that have been built up and have taken on additional workforce. Our thoughts are with such companies; I can think of a couple in Ballymoney, in my constituency, that have invested very heavily on the basis of the contracts that Wrightbus has been able to secure. As we have said, tonight there will be a question mark over those companies, and they will be asking what is going to happen.

Wrightbus has today announced 235 possible redundancies; however, I do not want to become the prophet of doom — we have to try to be as positive as we can be, despite the awful circumstances that we find ourselves in. The Executive and Assembly need to collectively reassure those companies and the affected families that the help and assistance that will be required will be there.

When we think of innovation, we think of Wrightbus. When I travel to London with my family, they become somewhat annoyed that every time I see a Wrightbus, I refer to the fact that it was made in Ballymena.

Wrightbus was, and is, a brand that we are proud of. There is an issue now for the Assembly to prove not only to the people in Wrightbus and everyone affected by that announcement, but to Northern Ireland plc, that the devolved Administration can, when faced with a challenge, rise to it, difficult and demanding though it may be. We should not run away from that challenge and, with the collective goodwill of the House and the Executive, I hope that we can be of help and assistance. Our thoughts and prayers are with not only all those affected by the announcement of the 90-day consultation period, but the entire workforce of Wrightbus.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: This is a sad day. I have just come from Ballymena, and, although this is a sad day, it is a day on which we must face up to this as a challenge. It is all right for us to say what we are saying, because it has to be said, but we must now face up to the challenge.

Some years ago, Mr Wright and his friends faced up to a challenge in Ballymena, and they did a very good job of work. Everywhere that I have been in the world, I have talked about the Wright brothers and the way that their company developed. However, today we are facing the problem of people having lost their jobs and the signal that more people will lose their jobs. What are we going to do about that?

3.45 pm

I trust that the Ministers concerned, along with all the parties in the House, will get together and devise ways whereby we can do what the firm is asking us to do, especially in areas where there is a possibility of securing employment, such as apprenticeships. What will we do? We must come up with a practical solution

— something that is workable and which we will have to put our minds and hearts into. I believe that that can be done.

Ballymena is not the only area that will be affected: a lot of people outside the town and further up towards the County Antrim coast are affected. It affects us all. I trust that the House and the Executive will be able to find a way to face that challenge, and other challenges that will come. Some other Member, not far hence, may soon be standing up for his or her constituency. We are all in this business, and we must all face the challenge. However, we do not want words; we want actions. We need a plan, we need to know how we are going to work out that plan, and we need to carry it forth. We will have many discouragements, and many people will ask, “What is the use of doing that?” Every possible way must be found to try to counteract the bitter and terrible situation that has arisen in Ballymena and that will arise across the Province.

I believe that, if we can get the determination and the strength of the brains that we have in the Province behind the same cause, we can pull ourselves out of a very challenging and sad situation.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I speak as a representative of a constituency that is adjacent to North Antrim, and who has constituents who are employed by Wrightbus. On that basis, I would have wished to have been able to contribute to the discussion by more than my presence. Will you, Mr Deputy Speaker, raise with the Speaker the question of how issues such as the dreadful news from Wrightbus, which cross constituency boundaries, can be addressed properly under the procedure for matters of the day?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member knows that he is more than welcome to raise that matter, and any other matter, with the Speaker.

The final item on the Order Paper is the Adjournment. Mr Mark Durkan has indicated that he no longer wishes to raise the matter of the North West Gateway Initiative in Foyle, and he is not in his place.

Adjourned at 3.48 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 2 March 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Buchanan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain to the House the decision that has today seen acute services stripped from Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh, which has provided life-saving services to the community in that area for more than 100 years. Mr Speaker, is it in order for those cuts to be implemented —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Buchanan: — despite a promise from this Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Buchanan: — and previous Ministers to retain services at Tyrone County Hospital until —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is certainly not a point of order. That said, I am sure that the Minister, who is in the Chamber, has noted your comments.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to clarify whether you have received any notification from the Ulster Unionist Party that, since its demise, it is to be redesignated as UCUNF — Ulster Conservatives and Unionists - New Force — in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: The Member knows well that that is not a point of order.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it the case that these people used to have the word “Ulster” in their party name but now no longer use it? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I have already warned all sides of the House not to misuse points of order. That goes for all sides of the House.

Mr Durkan: We can go off them for Lent. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNarry: It would be a 40-day wonder. *[Laughter.]*

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments that are tabled to the Bill. No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

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

That the Draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

Before dealing with the statutory rule, I will set out the rationale behind the measure and its underpinning context. As Members are aware, a maximum capital value was established on the introduction of the new rating system in April 2007. It was brought forward as a result of the political discussions that took place prior to the restoration of devolution, to ameliorate some of the excesses of the new system being introduced under direct rule. However, the debate is not about whether we should approve regulations to have a cap or not to have a cap, but rather at what level it should be set.

The capital value threshold is set at £500,000, limiting the rates liability for people living in properties above that threshold. That converts the highest bills facing Northern Ireland's ratepayers to the absolute maximum council tax bill in England. The regulations before us today are part of the outworkings of the Executive's review of the domestic rating system. In November 2007, the Executive mandated that change, reducing the cap from £500,000 to £400,000, subject to further consultation and an impact assessment being undertaken. The change will ensure that, in future, ratepayers locally will pay no more than the average bill in the highest council tax band in England. It is only fair and right that ratepayers locally should not be disadvantaged when compared with the general position in other parts of the United Kingdom.

In light of the Executive's commitment, a consultation was undertaken last year on reducing the maximum capital value to £400,000, with views also sought on compensating payments to councils adversely

affected. More than three quarters of consultation responses were in favour of the lower cap, with some even suggesting a lower threshold of £300,000. The remaining responses were split between those opposed and those providing some general comments.

Having considered the consultation responses, as well as the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the Executive have agreed that, on balance, a maximum capital value of £400,000 is appropriate. That will ensure that ratepayers locally pay no more than the average bill in the highest council tax band across the water. Setting the threshold any lower would adversely impact on revenue levels or on service provision. The £400,000 threshold can further address concerns about the excesses of the rating system. It also recognises that there are limits to the benefits that individuals receive from regional and local services.

Before turning to the statutory rule, I will address some concerns that were previously raised about the impact of the measure on other ratepayers and councils, and also from an equality perspective. It is wrong to say that the reduced cap will hit the pockets of other ratepayers. The regional rate has been frozen until March 2011, meaning that there will be no increase for other ratepayers as a result of the measure.

We are also taking steps to moderate the effect that the measure could have on district rates, by putting compensating arrangements in place. In the longer term, even if revenue losses were recovered from other ratepayers, it would add about 8p a week to the average rates bill. However, I do not think that that situation is envisaged, as additional revenue will be raised through the rating of empty homes.

Turning to the equality impact of the measure, an integrated impact assessment was undertaken and consulted on. The analysis, which is published in full, did not raise any concerns that there may be any differential impact between the different section 75 groups. Nevertheless, the impact will continue to be monitored and evaluated as new data become available. I hope that that reassures Members.

Finally, concerns have been expressed about the impact on councils, and I thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its attention to the matter. In taking decisions on the issue of compensating payments, I have had to balance how the reduced cap will affect councils, with the impact that compensating payments may have on overall revenue levels and revenue foregone. In light of that, I will shortly bring forward, as previously announced, a draft rates amendment Bill, which will include provision for compensating payments to councils.

That will relate to the reduced cap only and will apply for the next two rating years. As a transitional measure, the proposal is to set compensation at 100% and 50%

respectively for the next two years, and that will take us to the point when local government will be reorganised.

The statutory rule provides for the reduction of the maximum capital value to £400,000. It also provides that where a property — such as a manse — is partially exempt from rates, the level of the maximum capital value can vary between £200,000 and £400,000. Members of the Executive and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have already been advised of our intention to make the statutory rule. No substantive comments were received, and the Committee has approved the regulations. Therefore, I commend the draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 to the Assembly and ask that they be approved.

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 Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) proposal for this subordinate legislation at its meeting on 28 January 2009, at which the majority of members who voted agreed that they were content with the policy implications of the proposed legislation.

The legislation facilitates a reduction in the maximum capital value from the £500,000 limit, set in April 2007, to £400,000 from April 2009, as the Minister has explained. The Committee previously considered the potential impact of a change to the level of the cap in its response, published in November 2007, to the Executive's review of the domestic rating system. Having taken substantial evidence on that and other areas of domestic rating policy, the Committee recognised in its report that there was no clear consensus as to the merits of a change to the cap, and it recommended that DFP consider the options further, in the wider context of decisions on rating reform and overall affordability and fairness.

DFP consulted widely on the Executive's subsequent decision to reduce the cap, and officials have briefed the Committee on the outcome of the consultation. The Committee subsequently considered the statutory rule on 18 February 2009, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee agreed to recommend to the Assembly that the draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed. However, one member voiced concerns at what he considered to be the regressive nature of the regulations and asked that those be recorded in the minutes of proceedings. The Committee agreed to that.

On behalf of my Committee, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: My party is not sympathetic to this proposal to reduce the cap. However, it is not our intention to divide the House on the matter. We lack sympathy for the measure because we see it as regressive. It lifts the burden of taxation from those who can afford to pay it and, therefore, increases it on those who cannot.

Rates contain two elements: they are both a charge for services and a method of taxation. The regional rate is more a form of taxation than a charge for services, and that raises the question of how good the rates system is as a form of taxation in relation to the ability to pay. We have discussed that many times, and we know that a system of rates based on the capital value of houses is not a perfect measure of ability to pay. The valuation of a person's house is, at best, a crude measure of ability to pay. That is why we have developed a substantial system of reliefs in the rating system.

The SDLP supported the concept of a cap on rates. We considered that the cap, originally placed at £500,000, gave reasonable protection against unreasonably high rates. We have not seen convincing arguments for reducing it, and it is not clear from where the pressure to reduce the cap has come.

The only argument put forward has been to make the maximum level of rates comparable with the maximum council tax in England. That is not an argument that I find particularly convincing.

12.15 pm

We are conscious that there are persons who are asset rich and cash poor. As I have discussed, a rates system is not perfect. However, looking at the situation in the round, we felt that no sound or solid argument had been raised against the original cap of £500,000. Therefore, we would have left the cap alone. That is our position. However, we are not going to force a division on it.

Dr Farry: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council.

The Alliance Party is opposed to the move, and has been consistent on that issue. Unfortunately, I missed the final vote in Committee. However, I have consistently made my concerns known in that forum.

At times, we have criticised a lot of the populism that comes out of the Executive; populism rather than prudence. The rates cap takes that a step further. Essentially, it is a redistribution of the tax burden from those in society who are better off, to those in the middle of society — the middle classes. I think that there is a major issue of fairness that must be pointed out in relation to what we are doing. What we said about a £400,000 cap are the same points that we made about a £500,000 cap and about the wider principle of rates capping in general.

Certainly, there is a problem for the asset rich and income poor in society, who have problems when faced with steep rates bills. However, there are other ways in which those people can find some degree of relief; for example, through extending the current scheme to take into account widows, widowers, or double pensioners. Indeed, we could go further and advocate a local income tax as the fairest and best measure of one's ability to pay. However, perhaps that is a debate for another day.

The rates cap is a blanket subsidy that assists a wide range of people, including those who can quite readily pay their fair share to society. In economic terms, there is a considerable deadweight to what is being proposed. Although a retired couple, who are pensioners, may benefit a little from what is being suggested, the millionaire who lives in the mansion will benefit, I would argue, considerably more than those whom we are trying to assist.

The people in the middle, those who are paying rates on middle-value properties, will have to fund the subsidy. It is worth pointing out that the average capital valuation — going back to the January 2005 figures — is in the region of £150,000. An awful lot of people in the middle are going to be subsidising those who are better off.

Ms Purvis: Does the Member agree that those on middle incomes are the worst affected in the economic downturn and that, therefore, the rates burden will add to those burdens in the long run?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for her intervention, and I fully agree with her. It is worth stressing that, particularly in the current climate, the people in the middle tend to suffer the most. The better off in society have a cushion that allows them to adjust to different economic circumstances, whether that is through savings or through something else. However, there are a lot of people who are living from hand to mouth based upon a pay cheque coming in every month, and in some circumstances, that pay cheque has disappeared. Those are the people who are in the difficult situation of trying to pay their rates bills.

The combined effect of the two caps — £500,000 and £400,000 — will be a loss in revenue of around £5 million. Currently, the Finance Minister argues that that has been funded centrally and is not being passed on to the regional rate. It will be in the future. Today, it is seen only in the context of district rates, and it is important to bear that in mind.

Some may say that the financial side of the redistribution is marginal; I think that the Minister talked about 8p. However, two points need to be made. First, there is an important principle at stake regarding fairness, and the signals that the Assembly sends to society as to what its priorities are. To date, we are

sending out the signal that it is the better off who have our ear, rather than those who are not so well off. Secondly, although the overall redistribution may be fairly minimal at a Northern Ireland-wide level, in those district council areas that have the greatest concentration of qualifying properties, the effect of the redistribution will be much more substantial.

Rates capping cuts a significant slice off the local tax base of district councils, and if a council maintains its existing spending plans, the rates burden has to be passed on within the narrow confines of that council area. To put that into context, the net effect of a rates cap in the North Down council area would mean, all other things being equal, a rise of 2.5% on the rates. That is more than the level of inflation. For all the propaganda around the freeze of the regional rate, the fact that an Executive policy will lead to a 2.5% rise in rates for local people at the district level has to be taken in its proper perspective.

I note that transitional relief is being given to councils for the £400,000 cap for the first two years. Although that is welcome and provides some immediate assistance to the most affected councils, it is only a short-term deferral of the challenges to come. In two years' time, the full effect of the cap will be felt in the system. I certainly hope that the economic situation then will be better than it is today, but that is a danger in the system.

The argument has been made that rates capping brings Northern Ireland into line with the highest council tax bands in England. Frankly, that is a weak argument. In the early 1990s, the banding approach to council tax was rushed in during the clamour to get away from the poll tax. The banding process, which caps the highest rates, is regressive in nature. In England, that has led to situations in which millionaires are paying the same level of rates as people who are working hard and living from hand to mouth. Therefore, in that sense, we should not be aspiring to the council tax model in England. The overall effect would be a tax hike on the middle class.

Mr Hamilton: Issues concerning the rating system are of pivotal importance, and they are among the few areas whereby the Assembly can raise income. The high turnout in the Assembly for this debate bears testimony to that. I am sure that the high turnout has everything to do with the debate on the maximum cap and nothing to do with the class photograph. I welcome the increased interest, and the handful of four or five of us who usually debate such issues are glad to see everyone else here this morning.

I support the proposed reduction of the cap from £500,000 to £400,000. In the not-too-distant past, at the time of the introduction of the capital value rating system, much clamour was made for the introduction

of a cap. Direct rule Ministers accepted the principle that there should be a cap, and the figure of £500,000 was adopted. As the Minister said, the principle has been accepted and agreed by all parties in the Chamber, and, indeed, all parties have lobbied in favour of that.

The debate and discussion is now about the level of the cap. I think that £400,000 is a sensible level for the maximum capital value. As the Minister and other Members have said, reducing the cap from £500,000 to £400,000 will ensure that Northern Ireland ratepayers will now pay no more than the highest council tax bill in the highest band in England. That is a valid reason for reducing the cap; it was unfair and wrong that ratepayers at the highest level in Northern Ireland were paying in excess of what would be paid in the highest council tax band across the water.

I know that there is no direct equivalence between what is paid for by council tax and rates, but given that, in many respects, they are as close as to make no difference, it is sensible to reduce the cap for that reason.

A cap of £400,000 is not a permanent measure, and any impact of future revaluations of property will have to be borne in mind. The cap could change. The argument has been put that this measure will assist millionaires on the one hand and will punish middle-income groups on the other. That is to forget that many people in Northern Ireland whose properties are valued towards the upper end of the cap of £500,000 are — to use a phrase coined at the time of the lobbying for the introduction of a cap — deemed to be asset rich but income poor.

Tremendous benefits can be received, not only from the original introduction of the cap, but from the reduction of that cap to £400,000. Those people must be borne in mind.

The fact that the regional rate was frozen last year, will, hopefully, be frozen next year if the Assembly votes in favour of the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, which is next to be debated, and, indeed, will be frozen the following year, means that the people in the middle, as they have been referred to, are not paying for that at all because the rate has been frozen. Had the regional rate been increased, a valid argument could have been made that a great number of people in the middle had to pay for the cap. However, the fact that the regional rate has been frozen proves that they do not. As the Minister said earlier, even if that were recouped from that group of other ratepayers, it would cost only 8p per household. That must also be borne in mind.

Dr Farry raised the issue of how that impacts negatively on councils. I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council. Although my council would not have been affected as adversely as Dr Farry's council

in North Down, it would, certainly, have been one of the top three or four councils that would have been negatively impacted by the introduction of a maximum cap. That is why my colleague from North Down Borough Council Mr Weir and I lobbied the previous Finance Minister and asked him to include in the consultation the idea of a transitional relief. I am glad that his successor, my friend and colleague the current Finance Minister, has introduced that transitional relief of 100% in the first year and 50% in the second year. That is of some benefit to councils in those areas.

The aim of all that, and, indeed, the next piece of legislation that will come before the House for debate, is to create a fairer rating system. The Executive inherited a rating system that was branded universally as unfair and unfit for purpose. I have set out many pieces of work that are to be roundly welcomed in the Chamber and outside of this place, such as the introduction of the lone pensioner allowance, which has helped thousands of people who are aged over 70 years and who live alone — to the tune of over £2 million. I believe that the average benefit to those individuals is approximately £150 per person.

The Assembly can discuss those who are worst affected and those who are on middle incomes and are badly affected by the rating system. However, there is an opportunity after the debate and when the motion is — hopefully — passed to freeze the domestic regional rate, which will also provide greater assistance to those individuals. The attempt to achieve a fairer rating system for Northern Ireland is a noble cause. It is now being better achieved by measures that are being taken by the Finance Minister. I welcome greatly the reduction in the maximum capital value to £400,000. It will benefit a great many people in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Members who have taken part in the debate. I welcome the Committee Chairperson's comments and the Committee's support for the proposal. I have noted what other Members have said.

The proposal is a good-news story for ratepayers in Northern Ireland because it aims to ensure that there is greater fairness in the rating system. It is wrong to ask any local ratepayer to pay rates bills that are equivalent to the highest absolute council tax bill in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the position from which I approach the matter, and it is the right approach. Measures that have been taken in that particular Statutory Instrument, allied with that which is about to be introduced, mean that ratepayers in Northern Ireland will not pay as much as they would otherwise have paid under direct rule, and that there is greater fairness in the rating system.

I have noted a number of comments that have been made about the Order's impact on other people and

about its being a regressive measure. In case Members did not listen to what I said during the debate, I must re-emphasise that — as was pointed out by Mr Hamilton — the regional rate has been frozen until March 2011, which means that there will be no increase for other ratepayers as a result of the measure. Members must remember that in the future, measures will be taken that relate to empty properties, which will raise additional revenue. Therefore, there need not be any further impact thereafter.

Anyone who suggests that that good-news story, which introduced fairness into the rating system, is a rates hike must not have considered the matter with sufficient care and listened carefully to what we are saying.

12.30 pm

It is important to note that the transitional relief that we have introduced for councils will also ensure that the adverse effect in certain areas is not passed on to ratepayers through the district council rate. That measure has been widely welcomed, including by Mr Farry. I noticed that when he mentioned that issue in the context of relief in his council area, he did not attach all the caveats and concerns that he did when he spoke of relief for others. I suppose that all politics is local, yet I note that although he is prepared to accept that benefit for his council, he is not prepared —

Dr Farry: For two years.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is two years more than he would have got under any other Minister. He carped over some other reliefs. I believe in fairness for everybody, not only for people in one locality.

The measures on transitional relief were followed by a package that we introduced in January to provide £8 million to help councils across Northern Ireland. As a result of issues around the revaluation of certain Ministry of Defence and British Telecom properties, and other factors, councils faced the prospect of having to increase district council rates considerably. As a result of the £8 million package, those rates have not increased by the extent that they would otherwise have done. That is good news for ratepayers, and the announcement was widely welcomed at the time, including by Mr Farry.

The measure is about fairness in rating, and we have introduced other measures that will benefit ratepayers right across the board, about whom we are all concerned. We have introduced measures such as the lone-pensioner allowance. We have increased the maximum amount of savings that can be held on to, and we are introducing measures to allow people to defer rate payments and measures to offer green rebates.

The freeze on the business and domestic regional rates will benefit households, hard-working families and businesses considerably. Moreover, we introduced relief for councils on council tax a short time ago. Ratepayers will be better off as a result of those measures, and the rating system will become fairer. I commend the good-news measure to the Assembly and hope that it is passed unanimously.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Draft Rates (Maximum Capital Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

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

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

I think that people across Northern Ireland will widely welcome the introduction of this measure. The Order translates the money that we plan to raise from the ratings system, which was agreed as part of the Budget process, into precise pence in the pound, in order to allow individual bills to be prepared. It fixes a regional rate for domestic and non-domestic ratepayers. The other element of a rates bill is the district rate, which is each council's responsibility.

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

The Order is routine in nature and is an annual event. It is, however, the means by which the Assembly sets the rates that households, businesses and organisations must pay from April and provides the revenues that are needed to help to fund key public services. It does no harm to remind ourselves that in the final three years of direct rule, domestic regional rates increased by 9%, 19% and 6% respectively.

It was in that context that my predecessor announced during the Budget debate in January 2008, that there should be a freeze on the domestic regional rate for the next three years. Similarly for the business regional rate, he announced that it would be held for the next three years at the rate of inflation, which at that time was 2.7%. That was to ensure that no increase would take place in real terms over that period. That was good news, and another example of devolution making a difference.

However, I do not need to remind Members that a lot has happened in the world since January last year, and Members will be aware that as a result of the changing context, I announced in the Assembly on 15 December 2008 that the non-domestic regional rate would be frozen in cash terms for 2009-2010. That is a measure worth some £8 million to the benefit of Northern Ireland businesses. Therefore, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates will be pegged for the coming year, assisting households and businesses alike. That means that the total projected revenue that will be raised from the regional rates in 2009-2010 is estimated at £543.3 million.

When devolution was restored in 2007, the Assembly and Executive agreed unanimously to set economic growth as a priority. That remains our goal in these difficult times of global recession and severe pressures bearing down on all employment sectors. We have already held on to industrial de-rating — which, with

hindsight, was a particularly wise move — and I trust that this measure, which gives effect to a rates freeze for all sectors of business, demonstrates our continuing commitment to the business community. Likewise, for our householders. There has been criticism in recent days about help given to householders, and I reject that criticism. Householders are facing considerable financial pressures, and we need to demonstrate that the Assembly is not imposing even greater strains on household budgets that cannot be afforded.

Although we can already point to the deferment of water charges, freezing the domestic regional rate will provide further help for every rate-paying householder. Therefore, the legislation represents delivery of promises made to all hard-pressed businesses and households in Northern Ireland that we would do what we can within our limited means to ease the burden of the problems that are facing us as a result of the global recession. No other region of the United Kingdom can claim to have responded so decisively to the worsening economic outlook. It will, of course, require belt-tightening for those who deliver our essential public services, but I know that they are up to the serious challenge of putting efficiency first, working within their budgets, and achieving the savings needed to make the rates freeze work.

I will now briefly describe each of the articles of the Order. The rule specifies the regional-rate poundages for the financial year 2009-2010. Article 1 provides the title of the Order, and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides for the duration of the Order, which will apply until 31 March 2010. Article 3 specifies 29·89p in the pound as the commercial regional-rate poundage, and 0·3608p in the pound as the domestic regional-rate poundage. I commend the Order to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the proposals for the subordinate legislation at its meeting on 28 January 2009, and was, with one abstention, content with the policy implications of the Department's proposals at that time. The statutory rule comes before the Committee for Finance and Personnel — and, subsequently, the Assembly — on an annual basis, and represents the outworkings of the Executive's decisions on the level of domestic and non-domestic regional rates each year, as the Minister has described.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel announced the Executive's proposal to freeze the domestic regional rate for three years, from April 2008 to 2011, as part of his draft Budget announcement in October 2007, and the levels were subsequently confirmed in the final Budget approved by the Assembly in January of last year. An announcement that the increase in the

non-domestic rate would be pegged at the rate of inflation was superseded by the Executive's response to the economic downturn. The Minister of Finance and Personnel subsequently announced in the Assembly on 15 December last that as an interim measure, the non-domestic regional rate would be frozen in cash terms for 2009-2010, and that that would be worth around £8 million to Northern Ireland businesses in 2009-2010.

At its meeting on 18 February 2009, the Committee for Finance and Personnel considered this statutory rule, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee agreed unanimously to recommend to the Assembly that The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion, which seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order.

Mr Hamilton: It is a pleasure to speak in support of the freezing of the domestic and the non-domestic regional rates for the incoming year. We often hear others ask us what the Assembly is doing to help people. These are trying and testing economic times; pressure is being felt across the country on household and company budgets, and people are asking us what the Assembly and the Executive are doing to make life a little bit better. What we are doing today is a prime example of where the Executive are offering help and assistance, where it can be offered, on an ongoing basis.

The domestic regional rate is being frozen for yet another year, and this is the first year of a freeze on the non-domestic regional rate, which, I understand, is worth approximately £8 million for local businesses. That saving alone will provide significant assistance, particularly cash-flow support, for some businesses that are finding the current economic climate extremely testing.

We must also view today's measure in the context of historical regional rate rises that the people of Northern Ireland faced and that were at times, quite frankly, obscene. In the last four years of direct rule, there were regional rate rises of 8·8%, 9%, a staggering 19%, and finally, 6% in 2007-08. The non-domestic regional rate rose by 3·3% in each year over that same period. The amounts that people in Northern Ireland were being charged for services in their domestic regional rates bills were well over the odds and were well in excess of inflation in each of those years; indeed, they were ridiculously high amounts.

In the current difficult economic circumstances, in which there is a strain on household budgets, it is only right and proper that the Assembly approves a freeze, not just on the domestic regional rate, but on the non-domestic rate. When the new measure for freezing the non-domestic regional rate is viewed in the context

of the, hopefully, imminent introduction of a small-business rates relief scheme, one can see the commitment of the Assembly to making businesses and economic growth our number one priority.

By and large, whenever they have been striking their rates, most district councils have been respectful of the 0% increase in the domestic regional rate and have not used it as an opportunity to jack up their half of the rate unnecessarily. That has resulted in fairly good news stories from across the country, where the combined rate is quite favourable in comparison to that of the recent past. Newtownards, in my constituency, had by no means the lowest district rate increase this year at just under 5%, but the average ratepayer in the borough was paying an increase of only £1.32 a month. Unfortunately, however, I have to admit that that was by no means the best rate in Northern Ireland — some other councils struck a much better rate. In many areas, however, the impact of such action, coupled with the freeze that will be achieved by the 2009 Order, will be of great benefit to people in managing their budgets.

Given where we are and where the country finds itself, the Minister of Finance and Personnel's predecessor showed great foresight in freezing the domestic regional rate over the three years. He showed great wisdom in extending that freeze to non-domestic regional rates. Had the Executive not already set that policy, there would be a clamour to introduce something exactly like it. It is great to be ahead of the game and to show great foresight and wisdom by introducing such policies. I am pleased to support the motion, which I will vote in favour of later.

12.45 pm

Mr O'Loan: As the Minister of Finance and Personnel said, the effect of the measure will be to freeze the domestic and non-domestic regional rate in the next financial year. The essential change since the proposals were made in the original three-year Budget has been to move from pegging the non-domestic rate to inflation to freezing the non-domestic rate, the effect of which will be to confer an £8 million benefit on the business sector. Obviously, our businesses are under considerable pressure, and that sector will certainly very much welcome that measure.

The Order is, obviously, a broad-brush and untargeted measure of support. That means that it will benefit businesses that could have well afforded to pay the non-domestic regional rate had it increased in line with inflation, as well as benefiting those businesses that very much need that support at present, and there is that weakness in the measure. Nonetheless, it is a meaningful measure of support to businesses at a time when they are under immense pressure, particularly those businesses whose order books are declining,

which is a huge reality for many businesses throughout Northern Ireland. For that reason, I support the Order.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party is not minded to divide the House on this issue today. However, we have considerable reservations about the Executive's approach to rates, including their decision to freeze the regional rate.

In the current situation, the Executive may have stumbled into doing the right thing for two reasons, but their longer-term rates strategy is fundamentally flawed. The first reason is that of the current economic situation and the difficulty that people are having in making ends meet, and not adding to that burden. That challenge is particularly acute for businesses, in particular small businesses. In that respect, the Order will, obviously, provide some assistance.

As Mr O'Loan suggested, we need to be careful not to overstate that argument. In difficult economic situations, Governments should seek to avoid raising taxes. Indeed, a body that has full fiscal and borrowing powers will be tempted to borrow. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there has been scepticism about some measures to cut taxation as a means to stimulate the economy. Even DUP members have joined others in criticising the British Government's cut in VAT on the grounds that it is an unfocused measure of assistance and that it might not be effective in encouraging people to consume more, because people might decide to save their money given the economic uncertainty. Therefore, although I recognise the economic situation in which we find ourselves, there is a danger of overstating the relevance of that argument in addressing the situation.

The second reason — which is justifiable in the current year — is the situation with the district rate. Many councils face difficult situations, a point to which Mr Hamilton alluded, and have done a lot of work to try to bring their rates down. Nevertheless, those rates are still considerably above the level of inflation. Government — and Government here — have contributed to that situation facing councils, not least the situation with rates capping, about which we just spoke. Although the £400,000 cap has been delayed for two years, the £500,000 cap is a real and present issue facing local ratepayers.

It is important to avoid making direct comparisons between the district rate and the regional rate, because it is not as easy for councils to freeze a district rate as it is for the Executive to freeze the regional rate. For councils, the district rate may form more than 90% of their income; for the Executive, it is less than 10%. The Executive have, therefore, much more room for manoeuvre. Ideally, one would want to see the regional rate and the district rate rising in and around the rate of inflation. I would join Mr Hamilton in condemning the

large hikes in rates that took place under direct rule in recent years. However, perhaps we are now going to the other extreme.

In the current climate, the rate of inflation is very low, and we may even see deflation at some stage in 2009. Therefore, the practical difference between a rates freeze and the rate of inflation will be fairly marginal. There is a wider point to be made about trying to avoid a boom-and-bust situation with rates and about, over time, having a steady situation — we will see whether freezing the regional rate is something that the Executive can stand over and deliver.

It is worth making the point that no distinction is made in people's rates bills between the regional rate and the district rate — the two do not appear on a bill separately. If the Executive are contributing to the difficult situations in which councils find themselves and freezing the regional rate at the same time, the latter will have a minimal effect on householders' perceptions. Therefore, many of the Executive's actions, for which they are patting themselves on the back, may be missing the point.

I have no doubt that to freeze the regional rate will be a popular move, but it is also a very populist one. We have an Executive that places populism ahead of prudence. The danger of that is that it deflects analysis of failings elsewhere in the system. In some respects, the opposition have been more realistic than the Government at times and have avoided beating the populist drum. A freeze in the regional rate is a cut in real terms, because a freeze is below the rate of inflation. To put that into perspective, the difference between a 0% and a 1% rates rise for an average household is only about 6p a week.

I want to highlight a number of different problems and consequences of freezing the regional rate. First, it will result in a loss of revenue, which will have opportunity costs for other investments. We are already suffering from the distortions that are caused by trying to manage expenditure in a divided society, and the Executive are making that tight financial situation even worse. There has been no evidence of any analysis on how to address competing priorities — the Executive's knee-jerk reaction was to take the populist option. No doubt, we are all mindful of the funding crisis that faces a large range of public services in Northern Ireland. The Health Service is one area in which concerns have been raised, not just over the approach that has been taken to efficiency savings but over the amount of money that is being made available for the services that it provides. Therefore, there is a cost and a consequence to the Executive's actions.

Secondly, the measure is regressive — those who are better off will benefit disproportionately from a freeze in rates. Not every household in Northern

Ireland pays rates. Indeed, many of the worse-off in society depend disproportionately on the public services that the Executive are underfunding.

Thirdly, when it comes to our having a serious economic development strategy, we are in danger of becoming deluded. When Ministers are asked by journalists what they are doing to assist the economy, in their answers they routinely trot out as the major aspects of the Executive's economic policy the freezing of the regional rate and their action on industrial rating. Such self-congratulation has continued well into the economic downturn. It is worth making the point that those strategies pre-date the downturn and are not new policies to deal with the current economic situation.

Presumably, the logic of freezing the regional rate during a recession is to do with household expenditure. The hope is that people will spend their money and, therefore, stimulate economic activity. However, in a recession, people, owing to uncertainty, can be tempted to save their money. Even if people do spend, that spending may not be particularly well targeted at what our society needs — emphasis has been placed on consumption rather than on investment. Investment means modernising and rebalancing our economy to put us on a much surer footing so that we can take advantage of a recovery when it comes. The Executive's policy is all about today and contains nothing about tomorrow.

Indeed, one could make the point that opportunity costs arising from lost revenue could be better employed in stimulating the economy. It is worth noting that the policy of freezing the regional rate, which has been championed as the Executive's response to the economic downturn, does not have the Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) support.

Also, members of the Institute of Directors (IOD) largely oppose that measure. I hear the Minister of Finance and Personnel, from a sedentary position, heckling me on that point, but he should review the submissions made by organisations to the Programme for Government and the Budget. The CBI's position was clear, and I have attended various meetings with that organisation in recent months. The CBI highlighted the major concern about the Executive's adopting a populist approach to public expenditure rather than making serious investments in the economy. It is important for the Assembly to be clear about what it does and how, in practice, it helps the economy.

My fourth concern is about the Assembly's future relationship with the UK Treasury. The tax burden per head in Northern Ireland, for income tax and council tax, is lower than the UK average, and it could be argued that that gap is widening. There are good reasons for that, such as people in Northern Ireland being less affluent than those in most other regions of

the UK. However, the relationship with the Treasury is sensitive, and it is important to retain a balance and not to push the boundaries too far.

The Assembly is arguing for, and trying to protect, the Barnett formula. It gives money to the Assembly to enable it to provide a level of service in Northern Ireland. If the Assembly sends out the message that it will give more tax breaks to local people rather than investing that money in services, one must wonder what the Treasury's reaction to that will be and whether that move from the Executive serves the longer-term interests of Northern Ireland. It may be popular for a few days, weeks or months, but in the long run, if that move backfires, Northern Ireland may suffer the consequences for some time.

Similarly, the Assembly asked the Treasury for the Varney Review II, which produced a 120-page report. I do not agree with every aspect of that report, but I recognise it as a serious piece of work from a serious organisation. Some eight months after the report was published, the Executive sent a one-page letter in response. What will the Treasury's reaction be to that, particularly at such a sensitive time?

My fifth concern is about feeding into unrealistic expectations. Will the Executive be able to maintain the freeze on regional rates at 0% into the future? They have committed to doing so for three years. At some time in the future, they will have to face up to that issue. That applies equally to the deferment of water charges. Will the Executive maintain that situation indefinitely, or will there be a day of reckoning on which they will have to face up to that challenge? When that day comes, and having fed the expectations of the public, it may be much more difficult for the Executive to address the needs of society. Perhaps that is another short-term benefit that will create a long-term problem.

I approach the issue not from the left of society but from a liberal economic perspective. Serious concerns have been raised by respected voices in society, including many from the business community. A recent report from the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland has, essentially, been sidelined by the Executive.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member clarify the point that he has made for a second time? Is he suggesting that representatives of the business community — he mentioned the CBI and the IOD — oppose the freeze in the non-domestic regional rate, which is, effectively, the business rate?

Dr Farry: The business organisations were commenting on the household rates, and I draw a distinction between freezing those and providing assistance to businesses, for which rates are a concern, particularly for small businesses. The Executive's policy on household rates creates a considerable

economic deadweight. Some people may be in a position to pay increased rates that would fund services, whereas others may be suffering difficulties.

However, there are other ways to help those who are suffering, among which there may be a more economically effective option. It is important for the Executive to take on board the concerns that are being raised in society by serious voices. I am somewhat disappointed that only the Alliance Party has the courage to voice such criticisms, as opposed to hiding behind populism.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I note that you have the courage to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr Weir: The Member said that his party has the courage to oppose the motion. However, at the beginning of his contribution, he also said that the Alliance Party would not divide the House on the issue. At times, the courage of the Alliance Party seems to compare with that of the Italian Army. *[Laughter.]*

1.00 pm

Dr Farry: If the Member had listened to what I said at the start of the debate, he would know that I made it perfectly clear that the Executive have stumbled into doing more or less the right thing in the context of the economic downturn and large increases in the district rate. However, let us not delude ourselves. This is not a response of the Executive to the current economic downturn: this is a longer-term economic strategy from the Executive, one which I believe to be fundamentally flawed. It causes real harm to a serious economic response from the Executive, and to our public finances.

I say with some disappointment that it is only the Alliance Party that is raising any substantive concerns about the approach. I am speaking as a liberal. There are other people in this Chamber who call themselves socialists. I wonder where they have gone.

We will not force a division on the motion today. It may well be the right thing to do, but there are fundamental flaws. For the benefit of Mr Kennedy, I take it as read that the Tories are in favour of this type of thing.

Mr Ford: I had not anticipated that a topic of such concern would attract such little notice around the Chamber as to mean that two Alliance Members would be called to speak in immediate succession. It is an indication of the lack of seriousness with which this matter is being taken.

It will be interesting to hear a response. Perhaps we can expect the Minister to give a substantive response to some of the points that have been made by my colleague Stephen Farry. It is clear to me that his

concluding remarks were correct: the Executive have stumbled into doing the right thing this year. Mr Hamilton suggested, however, that this was a key long-term strategy that had been running since last year. There was no strategy last year other than cheap populism. The fact that the Executive are doing the right thing — in the short term — in a time of economic recession is not something that they should be claiming credit for as a long-term strategy. It is something that the Executive have merely stumbled into.

The real questions for the Minister are how he will face this in the future; how he will acknowledge the reality of what is required in the provision of funds for public services; and whether he will accept that giving a bonus to the best off in this society — in two debates in succession — at the expense of public services that benefit the poorest in this society, presents the kind of strategy that he claims to be the way forward.

It would be most interesting if we could hear some substantive answers from the Minister to the points that have been made so eloquently by Dr Farry.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am delighted to have the opportunity to defend a measure that will introduce rates relief to ordinary ratepayers in Northern Ireland and to businesses as well. It is something that has been widely welcomed by all parties, except for the tax-raising Alliance Party which, once again, has spent its time in this debate, at a time of economic hardship and difficulty in Northern Ireland, putting forwards all sorts of reasons why it knows that capping rates is the right thing to do, but then lists five or six reasons why it effectively opposes it.

It will not be lost on people in Northern Ireland — those who follow these debates and the wider public — that consistently, when there are measures, whatever form they take, that lessen the burden on households and businesses in Northern Ireland in these difficult times, when devolution is shown to make a difference for Northern Ireland, that it is Members from the Alliance Party and one or two others who consistently oppose those measures. They give all sorts of reasons why we should either maintain or increase costs on households at a difficult time.

I have heard the arguments about regressive taxation and so on with regard to the rates burden. By that same argument, I take it that the Alliance Party and Mr Ford are against the universal payment of child benefits since that, according to his logic, benefits the better off. Let us hear it now: child benefits are not targeted at those who are less well off; everyone gets those payments. Is the Alliance Party now saying that when it puts its principles forward with such eloquence, as it has been said, that it opposes universal child benefits? No, there is silence. Here is populism in action now from the Alliance Party.

That party is for things when it suits it and against things when it does not suit it. The Alliance Party seeks to take cheap shots at any measure that my party, this Executive or this Assembly introduce that might help people in Northern Ireland.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: You had plenty of time to make your points. Unfortunately, you did not make them well enough. You asked me to respond, so I am responding. The fact that you do not like that response obviously makes the point that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is well aware that all remarks should be made through the Chair. Therefore, I ask him to do so.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am always happy to follow the example that you and others set whenever addressing points directly to me as Minister. Furthermore, I am always happy to look people in the eye when I respond.

This measure has been discussed in terms that suggest that the right decision has been stumbled into. Members who speak in such terms appear not to realise that we have a Programme for Government, the strategy of which is to put the economy first. Growing a dynamic and innovative economy was the first priority to be agreed unanimously by the Executive and, indeed, by the Assembly.

Consequently, in line with that strategy, the Executive decided last year to do away with direct rate plans for industrial derating, for instance. We stuck to the position that industrial derating should be retained. I do not remember whether the Alliance Party was for or against the measure at that time. Perhaps it said that it was for retaining industrial derating, but, having given lots of reasons why it should oppose it, it chose not to force the matter to a vote in case somebody attempted to use the measure for unknown purposes.

Dr Farry: We opposed it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member says that the Alliance Party opposed the measure, and that is consistent with its wish to raise business and household taxes. Even then, the Alliance Party was opposed to the measures set out in the Programme for Government. If nothing else, the message going out is that the Alliance Party is consistently in favour of raising the tax burden on households and businesses in Northern Ireland.

Of course, when it comes to populism, no one can outdo some members of the Alliance Party who consistently propose all sorts of initiatives and projects that would entail greater public expenditure. However, I never hear any of them suggest where the money for such measures should come from. I am sorry — I take

that back; obviously, the money should come from hard-working families and businesses through tax rises.

The rest of us should get on with passing this important statutory instrument, which will be welcomed widely. The Confederation of British Industry and others are in favour of a regional rates freeze for businesses, and the fact that, as Mr Farry indicated, the Alliance Party is not in favour of a household rates freeze does not carry great weight with me because householders, hard-working families, individuals and communities who have suffered under direct rule deserve to share in the relief that businesses receive. That is good for communities, households and businesses. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):
I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] dealing with marine planning, marine licensing, the repeal of spent or obsolete fisheries enactments, and enforcement.

I see that I am emptying the House with this motion. [*Laughter.*] Nevertheless, the issue is important.

The UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] was introduced to the House of Lords on 4 December 2008. The Bill is in Committee, and it is expected that the final amendments will be completed at the end of March or the beginning of April.

The Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] contains certain provisions that deal with transferred matters of the Northern Ireland Assembly or which alter the executive functions of my Department. The purpose of today's motion is to seek the Assembly's endorsement to the principle of those provisions extending to Northern Ireland.

I thank my colleagues in the Executive for their support in bringing the motion to the Assembly, and the Committee for the Environment, which has stated that it is content with the Bill's terms.

The level of activities in Northern Ireland's marine waters is still relatively low and is mainly traditional: shipping, fishing and leisure activities. However, Members will appreciate the growing importance of the marine environment. This morning, Gaelectric announced its plans for the construction of a wind farm on the coast at Larne and its intention to use the salt caverns for storing compressed air. That illustrates the type of developments that may affect the marine environment in the future and which, therefore, will necessitate wider planning.

The need for recognition of the growing importance of the marine environment is particularly true at a time when we are beginning to see new activities emerge alongside the traditional ones that I mentioned. There is no doubt that that will lead to increased competition for the limited space that is available. One can appreciate the difficulties that can — and do — arise when there is a need to balance competing interests and to reconcile and integrate conservation goals.

Nevertheless, I want to ensure that opportunities continue to exist for those who wish to exploit the marine environment, but I want to ensure that that is done in a sustainable manner, because Northern Ireland has a valuable marine environment that must be protected.

It is for those reasons that I intend to put in place a framework to deliver that approach to marine management in Northern Ireland. Such an approach will mean that we are well placed to respond to future demands. That is a view that is shared by other Administrations in the rest of UK, and it is in line with wider thinking across Europe.

In considering how to proceed, I have sought to strike a balance between the need to stay in the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] for those matters in which legislative competence is reserved, or where I feel it is appropriate to do so, and to legislate by means of a separate Northern Ireland Bill, which I will introduce in due course for transferred or reserved matters, but where it would be appropriate to legislate in the Assembly with the Secretary of State's consent.

On that basis, I have agreed that the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] should extend to Northern Ireland in respect of the UK-wide marine policy statement. I have also agreed to marine planning in the offshore part only of the Northern Ireland zone — from the 12-nautical-mile limit to the boundary of the zone — and to certain marine-licensing reforms, particularly the replacement of the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 and its enforcement.

Furthermore, the Bill will extend the repeal of spent or obsolete fisheries enactments to Northern Ireland — specifically, section 13 of the Fisheries Act 1891, which no longer has any meaning because of a series of amendments over the years, and the North Sea Fisheries Act 1893, which dealt with offences for supplying “spirituous liquors” to fishermen in offshore waters in the North Sea, which is now obsolete.

Mr Wells: Hear, hear.

The Minister of the Environment: I hear that the Member for South Down Jim Wells supports that. The responsibility for that lies with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I am not saying that she was supplying the spirituous liquors or that, somehow or other, poteen from Fermanagh found its way to the North Sea, but those are Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) responsibilities. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development agreed that I bring that matter to the attention of the Assembly.

1.15 pm

I hope that Members will have an opportunity to read through the associated memorandum that was prepared for this debate. In practice, the extension of the provisions means that Northern Ireland will play a key role in helping to shape the framework for the UK seas by balancing our conservation, energy and resource needs; streamlining our regulatory regimes where it is appropriate to do so; and maintaining and protecting the marine area, so that the best value from its many uses can be achieved.

Some will say that legislation and regulation to manage and protect the marine environment is in place already, and that is true. However, it is complex, has been developed piecemeal over the years and is sectoral in nature. The sustainable approach to managing our marine environment that is outlined in the Bill has the potential to deliver real benefits for everyone; therefore, I want everyone to be closely involved in its development.

Already, representatives from Northern Ireland have been involved in three rounds of consultation, which has brought us to where we are now on the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]. The Executive and the Assembly's Committee for the Environment have also been consulted at key points, and I look forward to that positive engagement continuing.

Indeed, I want that positive engagement to continue into the work that will be starting shortly on a separate Northern Ireland marine Bill. In that context, I will want to engage with as many of the marine stakeholders as possible, including representatives of the renewables sector, environmental interest groups, the fishing industry, port authorities, those concerned with tourist interests and recreational users, to name but a few. I want to hear their views. Given the impact that the legislation will have, it is important that we get warnings and the views of the stakeholders at an early stage, so that there will be no surprises later on. We do not want to get complaints once the legislation has gone through and people see the impact that it has on their particular area.

However, that is for the future. Today is about seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the principle of certain provisions in the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] being extended to Northern Ireland. In doing so, we will be making the first important step towards developing an effective, joined-up approach to the management of the Northern Ireland marine environment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for introducing the legislative consent motion to the House. The Minister's proposals for the development of new policies and legislation relating to the management of the marine environment in the North first came before the Committee for the Environment back in December 2007. Members of the Committee were advised that the proposals would be similar to, and would complement, those being developed in the UK Government's marine Bill, but that they would be delivered in a way that would respect the devolution settlement and meet local needs.

The Environment Committee confirmed its broad support for the principles of the Bill last May. In October, the Committee noted the final policy clearance

and proposed timetable for the introduction of the Bill. In December, the Committee was asked by the Department to consider the terms of the legislative consent motion that is before us today. Members agreed the terms but sought further information on how the Department would liaise with the Republic on the issues that will be legislated for by Westminster in the delivery of the Bill.

The Committee is aware from previous experience that a legislative consent motion agrees in principle for Westminster to legislate in the area concerned, as opposed to agreeing the specific provisions of the Bill in so far as they extend to Northern Ireland. That means that there is an element of trust in the process, and there must be willingness in the Department to be proactive in its work with the UK Government and the other devolved Administrations to ensure the future protection of our marine waters. Pressures on marine space are continually increasing, and there is a need to allow development to take place and for people to benefit from the natural resources of the seas in a sustainable way, if conflict between marine activities is to be avoided in the future.

The Committee's understanding of the purpose of the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] is that it will establish a strategic system of marine planning and will balance and conserve energy use and resource needs.

It is designed to offer an opportunity for the sustainable development of the marine environment in addressing the use and protection of marine resources with sustainable economic and social benefit. However, some marine functions are reserved for the UK Government, while others are devolved and left for the regional Administrations to decide on the need to bring forward new legislation for the management of local terrestrial waters. Therefore, we must not be complacent and think that in giving legislative consent to Westminster today Northern Ireland is absolved from its responsibilities towards the marine environment.

As the Minister said, existing regulations for managing marine activities in the North have evolved over the years rather than being strategically planned, and it would be fair to say that the waters are, indeed, muddy when it comes to legislation for protecting the marine environment. To help clarify the situation, during 2008, the Committee sought further information from the Department, the Marine Task Force, and the Assembly's Research and Library Services. Members were informed that the provisions of the Bill that extend to Northern Ireland relate to planning, licensing, conservation, a marine policy statement and some implications for fisheries.

The Committee was warned by conservation organisations that the UK Bill, in itself, will not protect

local waters. It will set a framework for better management, but a lot will still need to be done at local level to ensure proper marine protection. For example, in planning, the UK Bill requires a UK-wide marine policy statement agreed jointly between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, but unless marine plans to implement the policy statement are introduced here in the North, the objectives of the UK Bill's joint vision for Northern Ireland will simply not be met.

Another concern presented to the Committee is that the actions taken at Westminster to implement the Bill will replace existing legislation that currently operates UK-wide with legislation applicable in England only. The Marine Task Force warned the Committee that there is a big risk of that happening in the area of marine licensing, and care must be taken to avoid leaving gaps in the legislation that leave us and our local seas unprotected until new legislation catches up, with the introduction of our own Northern Ireland marine Bill.

The Committee was advised that good legislation to protect our seas and to establish sustainable planning and development will not only benefit nature and conservation, but also help developers and those trying to harness the sea's natural resources for the benefit of all — and the Minister gave us an example of that. The existing regulations are very fragmented and dispersed across Departments and agencies, resulting in delays, greater inefficiencies and higher costs. A proper framework will lead to clearer guidelines and quicker assessments.

Further advice to the Committee pointed to the need for a more structured approach to interdepartmental co-ordination, and the UK Bill puts in place extensive statutory requirements for consultation and agreement with relevant Departments and agencies. To date, arrangements have been made on an ad hoc basis as and when issues emerge, and the Committee saw evidence of that as preparations were made by the Department for the legislative consent motion last year.

In closing, the Committee recognises the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] as a good start to protecting our seas and marine environment, and supports the terms of the legislative consent motion. However, passing responsibility to Westminster to legislate in this general area across the UK does not remove the need or the urgency for local action. The Committee looks forward to working with the Department sooner rather than later on local legislation to protect our seas. On behalf of the Environment Committee, I support the motion.

In conclusion, as an MLA, I emphasise once again our island needs. The need for North/South co-ordination is paramount to ensuring the protection of our seas and

marine environment as we develop a policy for that marine environment. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Wells: I welcome this consent motion. As Members will know, half of Northern Ireland's biodiversity can be found in our marine habitats, and there is increasing pressure on those species. Up to now, there has not been much in the way of development of our coastal regions. However, things are moving on rapidly; for instance, we see the move towards alternative energy sources, such as wind and tidal power. Clearly, we will have to address the issue of how to deal with those.

There is also the issue of balancing the interests of aquaculture and fishing. Many Members are aware of the dreadful plight of Rathlin Island's seabird population, which has crashed due — it is widely believed — to the overfishing of sand eels. Over the past few years, very worryingly, there has been an almost total nest failure for species such as the kittiwake and the razorbill. There was a partial improvement in 2008, but the previous two seasons were an almost complete wipeout.

The difficulty at the moment is that around 100 different laws impact on the management of our coastal regions and of our maritime environment. As the Member for Mid Ulster Mr McGlone said, the approach has been very much piecemeal, with various strands of legislation brought together without any co-ordination.

I was interested to hear that legislation barring the sale of liquor to mariners is to be repealed. That law should be retained. I do not want anybody the worse for wear in a trawler or tanker going around the coast of south Down. I am slightly worried that a consequence of the legislative consent motion will be to end the ban on drink on boats. However, apart from that, this is a very important piece of legislation.

We urgently need a system of integrated marine spatial planning. What the Minister has announced will not have a huge impact on Northern Ireland, because it involves high-level policy issues that affect areas that extend further out to sea, beyond our 12-mile jurisdiction. Nonetheless, it is a step in the right direction, particularly when the other devolved Administrations — in Scotland and Wales — have indicated that they will comply with the UK-wide legislation.

However, none of that will achieve anything unless we have our own Northern Ireland marine Bill, because we are behind the rest of the UK in protecting our seas and coastal habitats. England, Scotland and Wales, for instance, will soon have their own powers for the spatial development of activities in their territorial waters. They will also be able to designate networks of marine conservation zones, which are important for the

protection of fisheries. I regard that not as a threat but as a benefit to the fishing industry. All the evidence indicates that the fish population increases when marine conservation zones are set up, and the total catch rises proportionately. Therefore, marine conservation zones are welcome, but we do not yet have the power to introduce them.

England, Scotland and Wales will also have the ability to set up single management bodies to reduce bureaucracy and conflict. We are a long way off that, while other UK nations are almost up and running. We urgently need clarification of when the Northern Ireland marine Bill will come before us. It slightly worries me that we in Northern Ireland always seem to be several steps behind the rest of the United Kingdom in every area of legislation. For instance, after the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 was introduced, we did not have the equivalent legislation until the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

Similarly, on animal welfare legislation, we have had two years of the new Animal Welfare Act 2006 in GB. Unfortunately, our legislation is languishing far behind. Some day, perhaps, we in Northern Ireland should go it on our own and set an example to the rest of the UK, rather than always come in behind, late on in the day. Will the Minister indicate when the Northern Ireland marine Bill will be introduced? What issues will it address? More importantly, when does the Minister expect to see it on the statute book?

There will be a difficulty if the other parts of the United Kingdom have their legislation up and running and we do not, because issues will arise — the obvious one is alternative energy sources — that involve more than one jurisdiction. Without legislation to deal with that, where will we stand if an issue arises with Scotland or Wales? Apart from that, the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] is good news. It is good news for the environment and for our marine habitats. I hope that it is a step in the right direction towards protecting an enormously valuable economic and environmental asset for the community.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the legislative consent motion. Sinn Féin wants to see a marine Bill that protects the North's marine life and develops sustainable uses of Irish seas.

1.30 pm

Ireland's seas are vital to the structure of the nation, and it is essential that a new marine Bill will protect them sufficiently. However, the implications of the Bill as regards the all-Ireland dimension must be considered. As has been outlined, the Bill has been designed for England and the devolved institutions, but there must be an all-Ireland dimension to any marine

planning in the Irish Sea. What mechanism will be in place to ensure that that will happen? Other Members have asked the same question.

Not only is it necessary to create feasible systems for managing marine activities, it is also vital to help protect and restore marine life and build flexibility to help our seas cope with future stresses, such as those posed by climate change. I know that that subject is very close to the Minister's heart.

I understand that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is reviewing the need to legislate locally for the fisheries measures contained in the Bill. Perhaps the Minister will expand on those aspects. The Bill refers to greater access, the mapping of our sea and more sustainable management of our marine life. It will provide better regulations to protect inshore fisheries and sea-fish nurseries, which will also be done through the proposed fisheries Bill. In addition, that will help the inshore pot fisheries and the long-term sustainability of sea angling, which has a potential economic benefit for our rural tourism industry.

In relation to our ports, I want more clarification about the process of new arrangements for simplifying and streamlining the licensing of dredging, which is a big issue. Will the Minister also outline the position as regards aggregates and clarify who has responsibility for the removal of aggregates from the seabed? I understand that that is the responsibility of DARD — will that remain the case?

A key focus for Sinn Féin is to ensure that coastal plans provide natural heritage and landscape values, protect and enhance public access, and contain objectives on the sustainable management of the seas. The content of the plans appears to be broad, including land use, planning, coastal space for aquaculture, and offshore planning for fisheries and renewable energy. As the Minister mentioned, Ireland benefits from some of Europe's strongest, sustained wind regimes, along with some of the world's best wave and tidal systems. Those present huge opportunities — for example, the tidal project in Strangford Lough — to grow the renewable-energy sector.

There needs to be a more cohesive regulatory regime for the marine environment and a forum for developers and conservationists to work together so that issues of conflict can be identified and resolved at a very early stage.

Recreational sea angling is a selective, environmentally friendly and low-impact fishing activity. It is a sport of great social and economic importance. The North of Ireland — and Ireland in general — should be a major centre for sea angling that is based around species that are not readily available elsewhere. To deliver that, the introduction of artificial reefs will help the sustainability of stocks. Perhaps the Minister will also touch on that.

It is widely recognised that a live fish on the deck of a boat is worth many times more than a dead one on the fishmonger's slab — it provides the option for release and re-catch in the future. The sport of sea angling falls between too many stools and does not get the support it truly deserves. We have an opportunity to turn the North into a world-class sport fishing destination. The Bill will go some way towards that because it will generate huge economic and social benefits for coastal communities and will generally increase revenue in the North. I would like to see that developed and taken seriously, particularly given the damage that has been done to inshore fisheries. That needs to be addressed, and the Bill will, hopefully, do that.

Sinn Féin hopes that the Bill will co-ordinate the sectoral interests — such as tourism, aquaculture, renewable energy and fishing — with the bigger, strategic picture. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the legislative consent motion. As a society, we are becoming increasingly aware of the need to protect our environment so that those who come after us can enjoy its benefits. The UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] proposes to confer powers to the Department of the Environment (DOE) as a maritime planning authority and to prepare maritime plans for offshore areas adjacent to Northern Ireland — as is the case with other parts of the United Kingdom. I support that.

Just as plans are developed for land regional areas, so, too, there is a need to manage the development of our marine environment. There are conflicting pressures on that environment, and as the Minister has said, we need to make a balanced judgement. Once again, in my constituency of East Antrim, we are becoming increasingly aware of pressures to develop energy resources in the area. An announcement was made this morning, and there have been previous announcements about offshore wind interests. Then, of course, there is the expanding concept of wave-generated power. As my constituency has a large coastal area, that is clearly of interest to me and my constituents.

So, energy production, both wind and wave, is an issue, yet there is also a need to maintain and protect the maritime ecosystem. Rather than deal with applications for development on an ad hoc basis, surely it makes sense for all concerned that maritime area plans be developed to give a greater understanding of where protection is needed. Moreover, that would give those who wish to develop renewable energy resources a greater understanding of the issues involved.

The Bill also states that there will be increased fisheries management and enforcement powers. That must be welcomed, because we must ensure that our fishing stocks can be conserved and regenerated and

can reach a sustainable level so that fishing will be profitable in the future.

The Bill indicates that any regional maritime plan that Northern Ireland would develop would have to be agreed by the UK Government before it could be adopted. That appears to be reasonable. We in Northern Ireland are close to regions such as Scotland and the Isle of Man, so what they do might impact adversely on our area. It is, therefore, important that the regional plans work with one another so that proposals in one area do not adversely affect those of neighbours in other areas. There would have to be an understanding that our plans should tie in with those of our close UK neighbours.

In the background paper — the legislative consent memorandum — that the Minister provided, it is stated that the Bill will:

“Introduce a streamlined, transparent and consistent marine licensing system — making it faster, cheaper and simpler to license marine developments.”

If that system is to be developed in the future, while, at the same time, our marine environment is to be protected, surely we must support those efforts. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: For some of us who sit on the Committee for the Environment, it is a pleasure to be able to agree with the Minister. Of course, that pleasure is enhanced by its rarity. On this occasion at least, we seem to have reached agreement.

I welcome the publication of the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] and its progress so far in Westminster. Therefore, I also welcome the legislative consent motion that is before the House today. It is clear that there has been a long-standing need for this kind of legislation, not just in Northern Ireland, but across the UK as a whole. Indeed, during the previous Assembly, I received support and approval for bringing forward a private Member's Bill to deal with marine conservation. That fell with the suspension of the Assembly in 2002, at about the same time that a similar Bill fell in Westminster because, I believe, of difficulties in the House of Lords.

It is long past the time when the Bill's measures were introduced. As others have said, whether or not we agree with every single word in the Bill, it is important that Northern Ireland can benefit from the protection that it offers as soon as possible.

There are several issues that the Bill clearly impinges on. I noticed with some amusement that the Minister mentioned the word “renewables” in his list of issues of concern but managed to skate past it fairly rapidly. Nevertheless, it is clear that when we look at the issues of wave, tide and wind power off our coasts, we need to have a measure of regulation that will deal with them appropriately and quickly.

The issue of fisheries falls largely within the responsibility of DARD. In recent years, it has presented a huge management issue in every part of these islands and in much of European waters, and that must be addressed. Furthermore, the whole problem of coastal developments not being properly catered for under planning provisions — whether it relates to tourism or to sewage, or to the unfortunate way in which sometimes those two issues come rather too close together — is an issue that requires attention. We need to ensure that we meet the economic needs of today while protecting the environment of tomorrow. In other words, we need to ensure sustainable development across all our coastal waters.

I welcome the way in which the Minister introduced the legislative consent motion, and I welcome his support for the principles behind the Bill. However, when he was talking about further responsibilities in Northern Ireland, unfortunately, he was a little less than specific.

I endorse the comments, particularly from Jim Wells, about the need for an early and detailed timetable as to when legislation will proceed in Northern Ireland, because there is no point in saying at this stage that we simply consent to the UK Bill. There is much that we have to do locally. I endorse the comments that the Chairperson made in that respect, and the support that the Committee received from the marine task force in looking at some of the details of where work is needed.

There are many points, but I will highlight only a few of them. There is a huge issue around the marine planning process for Northern Ireland, which is not yet addressed in the Bill, but for which we need legislation. There are major issues around habitat protection, not just around fisheries conservation zones, which were mentioned earlier, but around other aspects of our habitat. For instance, the variety of sponges on the north coast and around Rathlin has recently come to light.

Ideally, we need to have a single marine management organisation to deal with licensing and planning matters in coastal waters and to ensure proper co-ordination across the plethora of departmental regulations. The licensing process certainly needs to be streamlined, even if it cannot be done through a single marine management organisation, although that would be the best option.

The Minister has accepted those concerns, and he has talked about the need for legislation. However, the key issue now is when the legislation will be implemented. We have already seen difficulties with regard to the Department of the Environment's resourcing some of what needs to be done by way of legislation in the review of public administration. A number of Bills from the Department are already in the queue for Assembly time and for legislative drafting time.

However, if we are to make any sense of the legislative consent motion, it must be on the basis that the Minister will tell us today how soon we will be able to progress the Northern Ireland marine Bill and its necessary subsequent regulations.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the motion. The previous Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, looked at the issue and had meetings with the fishing organisations. By and large, what Members have before them is helpful in that the fishing organisations can, at least, feel part of the process. Nonetheless, will the Minister assure the House that there will be continuing contact with those organisations, that is, the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Association, the Irish Fish Producers' Organisation and the Northern Ireland Trawlermen's Trading Company, as they are the three local bodies that have responsibility for the fishing industry?

During meetings with the Minister's predecessor, Arlene Foster, we raised their concerns, as part of the process. Therefore, it is reassuring to know that we have a process that gives those bodies some peace of mind, because the fishing industry is very much under threat financially and physically. For that reason, we seek that assurance. Will there be continued meetings with the fishing organisations throughout the process?

I read through the paperwork that we received, and I am keen to find out what effect the Bill will have on the Isle of Man fishing territories, which have traditionally been fished by Northern Ireland fishermen. Therefore, it is of some concern to them.

1.45 pm

Last week, I met company owners who want to take advantage of natural energy resources, whether wind turbines or sea turbines. I believe that they are meeting members of political parties and those who expressed interest in this subject in the past. In Strangford Lough, SeaGen provides a good example in showing that such technology can work without, ultimately, affecting local fishermen.

However, there is probably a middle road, if that is the way to describe it, and perhaps the Assembly often has to travel such a middle road. However, there are those who are very much in the green lobby and those who are very much in the lobby of taking resources from the sea.

Annex A of the paper that we have referred to marine nature conservation and, in particular, to the Secretary of State being responsible for designating marine conservation zones. Perhaps that poses the question: if it is the Secretary of State who does the designating, is there a system in place whereby if a conflict arises between the Secretary of State and the Assembly, a way forward can be found? It is important to ensure that a conflict will not arise, and that those involved in renewable energy can take advantage of

opportunities, while, at the same time, the interests of those who fish traditional fisheries, for shellfish as well as for fish, are considered.

By and large, we welcome the fact that, at long last, potential exists for a marine Bill, and it is important that we catch up in that respect with our counterparts in Scotland and elsewhere.

I welcome the report, but I would greatly appreciate answers to those questions.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion and thank the Minister for tabling it.

Sinn Féin broadly welcomes the Bill and the spirit of co-operation across the islands in order to develop systems for managing the marine and coastal environments sustainably. The North has its own unique and diverse marine ecosystems, and the Assembly must develop further complementary legislation for the planning and protection of our marine environment in order to safeguard those ecosystems.

Therefore, it will come as no surprise to the Minister that I am concerned that there is no provision for North/South collaboration on the issue of marine protection. There must be a consistent approach taken across all these islands. The Minister is all too aware that marine wildlife and habitats do not recognise political boundaries, and the full realisation of the overarching aims of the Bill cannot be achieved without co-operation with the South.

We, therefore, need legislation for the North, establishing links with our counterparts in the South to protect and sustain marine life in all our coastal waters. That legislation would enable us to designate a network of marine-protected areas, streamline licensing across the Departments and establish a delivery mechanism or a marine management organisation for marine licensing and planning in our waters.

Will the Minister, therefore, indicate when he expects new complementary legislation to come into effect, and does he plan to introduce or establish a marine management organisation to deliver that? Furthermore, will he elucidate whether he will consider marine legislation for the North, with specific provision for North/South co-operation? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Weir: I support the motion.

I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, which, as everyone knows, is the premier maritime borough in Northern Ireland. As a representative of a coastal constituency, I think that the importance of the legislation should be obvious to us all.

This issue has, I believe, attracted a strong level of consensus and support, from not just all the parties in the Chamber — though that is welcome — but from the various organisations involved in maritime conservation. The purpose of any marine Bill, whether on a UK-wide basis or more locally based, should be to strike a complementary note between necessary conservation of the maritime ecosystem while recognising practical implications and protecting the rights of those who draw their livelihoods from the sea — particularly those in the fishing industry.

As a number of Members indicated, maritime policy is a complex issue that crosses jurisdictions, regional and national issues, and departmental issues. From a jurisdictional point of view, it is clear that what happens in Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland and in the other parts of the United Kingdom is interconnected. There has to be a degree of co-operation across the board. We should be careful that we do not get too narrowly focused on purely North/South co-operation. What is happening in the Republic, the Isle of Man, Scotland, England and Wales is relevant. Given the commonality of interest, this is probably an area that the various jurisdictions can work together on through the British-Irish Council.

In Northern Ireland, there seems to be a good spirit of co-operation on the issue. Clearly, there are areas that fall within the jurisdiction of the DOE and others that fall within the jurisdiction of DARD. From what the Minister said, good co-operation is ongoing to ensure that we get a joined-up approach.

Undoubtedly, the background to marine protection consists of various pieces of legislation and jurisdictions that are piecemeal in their nature. A Member made reference to muddy waters; this is an attempt to “unmuddy” the waters and to try to provide a common sense and joined-up approach. There are a range of issues that are meshed between transferred and reserved matters. The motion is a clear attempt to try to “unmesh” those issues in a sensible manner that allows for a two-stage process around marine protection. In particular, the motion looks at reserved matters, which, I think, are best dealt with on a UK-wide basis.

When setting overall policy, it is important that we are in step with the rest of the United Kingdom. The purpose of the Bill is to take the necessary first step toward proper marine protection. However, as the Minister and others indicated, the actions that we are taking, although a necessary first step, are very clearly not the final step. The Minister acknowledged that what we need is a local Bill that can deal with a range of issues, including marine wildlife; the streamlining of licensing; and inland fisheries management — a one-stop shop for the wide range of issues that the UK-wide Bill will not cover, or will not cover in a

sufficient level of detail. That will mean that local input will have to be provided through local legislation.

In common with other Members, I am impatient to see such legislation put in place. However, the need for a timely piece of legislation has to be balanced against ensuring that the legislation that does come forward covers all issues and provides the right solutions. I understand the frustration at the fact that we do not have local legislation at present; however, it is important that the proper consultation is completed with all the organisations involved to try to ensure that we provide holistic solutions that will benefit Northern Ireland. In that context, we can ensure that there will be sustainability of the marine environment.

The step that we are taking today — in backing the legislative consent motion, which has support from around the House — together with a commitment to future steps toward a Northern Ireland-wide Bill, will, I think, mesh together the jigsaw in a common sense fashion and allow us to preserve the best of the marine environment while recognising the practical implications that face Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the motion and the Minister’s comments about the growing importance of the marine environment and the need to provide better protection of it through legislation in Northern Ireland.

As Members know, the seas around our island and around the neighbouring islands are among our greatest assets; they support some of the world’s most important species of sea birds. Northern Ireland supports, for example, about 10% of the UK’s population of the sandwich tern, the common tern and the razorbill, yet protection of the environment is very poor. Seabirds face many threats to their survival from fishing, climate change, and from oil, chemicals and heavy metal pollution. The better protection of our seas is essential for all who use them and for the birds and wildlife that depend on them.

The SDLP will support the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] as a co-ordinated response to many of the marine issues. However, we want an even more effective response at local level, as the UK Bill does not deal adequately with marine planning or with wildlife or habitat protection. The SDLP wants an additional marine Bill to be introduced urgently for Northern Ireland.

Other Members made the point that given that we now have a key role in legislation, there should be clarity in the timetable for that legislation. It is also essential that the Northern Ireland Bill provide for an all-Ireland dimension, because wildlife and habitats protection and the protection of important ecology systems and spawning grounds cannot be dealt with in isolation. Protection of habitats around our shores can

be effective only if our efforts are co-ordinated with those of the Irish Government.

The fact that Departments in Northern Ireland have not worked together in the past has been a feature of the failure to protect marine life properly. Decisions about permitted levels of commercial fishing here have failed to take food chains and other implications for our marine species into account. Therefore, any Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly must address such failures and require the streamlining of licensing arrangements, particularly between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Minister of the Environment: Despite the fact that the consent motion is a technical piece of legislation, a wide-ranging debate has taken place and many points were raised. I suspect that many of those are more likely to be addressed by the Northern Ireland marine Bill when it is introduced, and today's motion is the first step towards that. Many of the provisions in the Northern Ireland Bill will have to be taken within the framework of the marine policy statements, which will be agreed on a UK-wide basis. I seek consent that the provisions of the UK Bill, with the marine policy statement, should apply to Northern Ireland and should form that broad framework.

Since several Members made similar points, I will not mention all Members who spoke to the debate. The Chairman of the Committee raised points on the planning arrangement; he wanted to ensure that there would be no gaps and that a joined-up approach would be taken. He also discussed the need for local action and input, and he raised the issue of input from the Republic of Ireland.

2.00 pm

As regards gaps, the Bill requires Administrations that plan for waters on the borders of the marine region to notify one another of their intention to plan and to take all reasonable steps to achieve compatibility. It is not, therefore, the case that everybody works in isolation, or that different Administrations ignore the policies that others follow. There is a requirement on all of them to plan for the areas that are near borders. There is nothing in the Bill that prevents Administrations from working together to plan for an area. That should help to avoid the gaps to which the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment referred.

Liaison has already taken place through preliminary discussion on marine issues between my officials and their counterparts in the Republic. As regards the UK Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL], the marine policy statement will be a UK-wide document that will set out the key priorities for the UK's entire marine waters. Arrangements will be made for trans-boundary

consultation with other member states on the areas where boundaries meet.

Part of Northern Ireland's offshore region does not actually lie adjacent to the Irish Republic, and the trans-boundary arrangements will be carried out through the UK Government. However, there will be issues in the marine Bill on which they will want to liaise with the Irish Republic.

I must point out, because a number of Members raised the matter, that it is in our interests to ensure that there is continuity in such legislation. If I have any complaint about arrangements with the Republic — and the Committee Chairman will be aware of the matter, as it concerns other legislation that his Committee has dealt with — it is that problems have arisen when we wanted to introduce legislation that required a joint approach, as it has usually been the Republic that has been found wanting. That can make it difficult for legislation that we want to introduce to be effective. Where those considerations exist, it is important that we ensure that we get the message to the Republic that we want to co-operate as good neighbours across the border to ensure that legislation is effective.

The Department has established an interdepartmental steering group to develop and take forward policy on local input and action. I have already given a commitment that external stakeholders will be consulted to ensure that there is as wide a spectrum of views as possible on the proposals. Indeed, during the coming year, officials plan to hold a number of public events to get local opinion.

I want to deal with points that Jim Wells raised in his usual impassioned way. Members are, of course, aware of his interest in the protection of the environment and, in particular, of bird life in Northern Ireland. A number of Members asked how quickly the Northern Ireland marine Bill will be introduced. The Northern Ireland marine Bill will be shaped by marine policy statements and plans that will be developed for the whole United Kingdom. Therefore, the motion can be considered as a starting point on the road towards putting effective legislation in place.

In the past, and in the debate, I have given a commitment that the Northern Ireland marine Bill, which will contain provisions for marine planning and marine-nature conservation, will consider the further streamlining of the licensing of devolved activities in Northern Ireland's territorial waters.

Do not forget that the Bill refers to what happens within the 12-mile limit off Northern Ireland's coast. I will consider all those matters with the relevant ministerial colleagues.

I intend to bring the proposals to the Executive for their agreement in early 2010, after which there will be

opportunities for stakeholder engagement during the policy development and the public consultation process. Given how long it takes for legislation to pass through the Assembly, I suspect that the Bill will be introduced by 2012. Some people say that the Assembly lags behind other Administrations. There are sometimes advantages in such a position, in so far as it helps us to learn from the mistakes of others and to see what provisions should be included.

Roy Beggs asked about a holistic approach. The marine planning process, which starts from the mean high-water spring tide, intends, for the first time, to take a holistic view of the marine area and to manage and regulate marine activity within environmental limits. That will minimise the impact of human activity and should have a beneficial effect on the environment.

Willie Clarke mentioned a number of points that I have already addressed, such as the role of the Irish Republic. I hope that I have made it clear that there will be, and has been, consultation, which I hope will prove more fruitful than such work in the past. He asked what effect dredging will have on ports. Given the fact that Warrenpoint harbour is in his own constituency, he was representing that constituency interest. However, the marine licensing should not result in any change for harbour authorities. The common activity that most harbour authorities undertake is the maintenance of the navigation channel. They will still be empowered to do that under harbour legislation, and marine licensing will not apply to that activity.

The extraction of marine aggregates is currently regulated by the Environmental Impact Assessment and Natural Habitats (Extraction of Minerals by Marine Dredging) (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2007. That activity will come within the scope of the new marine licensing regime, which, in reaching a decision, will take into account all the relevant social, economic and environmental factors.

Willie Clarke asked what impact the Bill will have on new technologies, such as natural-gas storage, wave power, and so on. Those technologies will be licensed in Northern Ireland's territorial waters by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), they will also require a marine licence until we are satisfied that DECC is operating a robust regulatory scheme. Once that is established, the marine licence will no longer be required. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will license our activities in sea loughs, and the marine license will be required there, too.

Willie Clarke also mentioned sea angling. The plan is to develop, through the new marine legislation, a sustainable marine environment and to have a planning process in place that will take account of all sectors. When we bring forward the Bill, there will be consultation with all those interests in order to ensure that they still

have the ability to carry out those activities, and carry them out within a framework, which, as I have indicated time and again, will be sustainable.

Mr Clarke and others asked about the plans for fisheries, and particularly about support for inshore fisheries. That is a matter for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and during 2009 she will bring forward local primary legislation for fisheries.

Mr Clarke also asked about the effect of the legislation on planning for wind farms. As I said at the start of my speech, that will be one of the big issues for the marine areas around Northern Ireland because of the potential for wind farms in them. The Bill will streamline the application process, and the extent of that streamlining will become clear in time. I think that those are all the issues raised by Mr Clarke to which I wanted to reply.

Mr Ford, who, I am glad to see, is back in his seat, said that it was rare for him to find himself in agreement with me. Given how often the Alliance Party gets things wrong, I am glad that it is a rare occasion on which I find myself in agreement with him. Of course, the ultimate test of how often the Alliance Party gets things wrong is the electoral test, which shows clearly that, as far as the people of Northern Ireland are concerned, the Alliance Party usually gets it wrong, and the electorate does not vote for it.

I am happy to find myself agreeing with Mr Ford only the odd time. The problem is that, even when one is in agreement with him, he never fails to find something to complain about. It must be terrible being married to him: "Lovely dinner, dear, but..." followed by a list of complaints.

He raised several issues, and said that I had been less than specific about the marine Bill — I accept that. However, the legislative consent motion is not about the Northern Ireland marine Bill; it is about seeking consent to allow certain matters that relate to Northern Ireland to be included in the UK's Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]. Those matters will shape the framework within which the marine Bill is formulated. Given that, it would have been wrong for me — and probably confusing as well — to have given a host of detail about the marine Bill, as that is not the subject of today's debate.

Mr Ford: I take the Minister's point. I am, however, grateful that he provided a date and said that the local Bill should be introduced by 2012. I appreciate that he answered my question, even if he now suggests that he did not want to.

The Minister of the Environment: I am always happy to answer Mr Ford's questions, but sometimes I cannot do so fully. He said that I was being less than specific about the marine Bill, but I have been as specific as I can. The consultation should start in 2010,

and the Bill should be in place by 2012. Its contents will be decided with reference to the outcome of the examination and consultation period on the policy.

Mr Wells: I fully understand why the honourable Member for East Antrim does not want to be too specific about the contents of the marine Bill, but I am slightly disappointed that it will be 2012 before it is placed on the statute books.

2.15 pm

My understanding is that this was all foreseen; we knew that it was coming. Is there any mechanism whereby the process can be speeded up? I have noticed that when something is politically popular or provides a way of raising revenue, some Departments — not the Minister's Department — find the time to bring in legislation almost instantly. This is an important issue. Is there any mechanism that can be used to ensure that the consultation happens this year rather than next year so that the programme can be brought forward?

The Minister of the Environment: I hope that the Member appreciates that the legislative burden on the Department of the Environment is a heavy one at present. If the Member takes into consideration all the legislation concerning the review of public administration, the review of councils and the extensive programme of planning reform legislation, he will appreciate that there is a considerable burden, not just on the draftsmen, but on departmental staff, and, consequently, on the Committee, because it must rigorously examine all that legislation. For reasons of logistics and resources, and because there are statutory requirements for consultation, which are, perhaps, more rigorous in Northern Ireland than they are in other parts, the legislative process will extend over the period that I mentioned. Marine policy statements and marine plans will form a framework, and part of the initial work will be done through what we agree to today.

Mr Ford also raised the issue of the marine management organisation and how we will co-ordinate all of this work. I accept his point that since the issue concerns a number of Departments, there must be an organisation that is outside the remit of any one particular Department. Otherwise, it might be seen that it had a bias towards one side of the issue rather than another. We will continue to look at the delivery mechanism, and we will consult with stakeholders on that issue before the marine Bill is introduced, so that we can determine how the policy should be overseen and what kind of organisation should do that.

Mr Shannon raised the issue of marine conservation zones and of what would happen if there were conflicts. Since he is not here, perhaps I should not answer his question. However, I will show him the courtesy of answering, even though he has not stayed to hear my response. My officials will develop proposals for

marine nature conservation in the context of Northern Ireland legislation. It is likely that the proposals will be similar to those that are contained in the UK Bill, which provide for a flexible designation regime for the needs of habitats and species that require protection.

The UK Bill also requires that any proposal for a marine conservation zone must take account of social and economic factors as well as environmental concerns. It is not a prerequisite that the marine conservation zones should attach a greater importance to any one of those interests; they will be considered in a balanced fashion. It is to be hoped that conflicts of interest will be addressed by way of consultation with all the interested parties. Mr Shannon also mentioned the Isle of Man. However, since it is a Crown dependency, it is not included in the UK Bill.

Peter Weir emphasised the importance of the east-west dimension. Of course, there is a UK-wide dimension. The whole point of Northern Ireland having an input into the marine planning statement is to recognise that there is a UK and east-west dimension.

Mr Weir also asked that I ensure that there is a joined-up approach with other Departments. My Department has been closely involved with other Departments, and, in fact, that will be central to the success of the process.

The Department of the Environment, as the policy authority for the adoption of the marine policy statement, must consult with other Government Departments that have functions in the area of marine management, including the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Of course, when we come to develop a marine plan for the Northern Ireland offshore region, we will undertake a similar consultation process with other Departments.

I hope that I have addressed all the issues that Members raised. No doubt there will be a lively discussion in the House when we debate the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL]. From the interest that Members showed today, there should be a close examination of it. We have an opportunity to build a secure future for Northern Ireland's marine environment — one that will deliver better regulation and will ensure that everyone, with an interest in the marine environment, is more closely involved in the decision-making process.

I notice that during this debate Members such as Mr Gallagher, who has now left the Chamber, and whose constituency does not even touch an inch of coastline, showed an interest in the issue. That shows that Members from across the Assembly have a wide interest in protecting our marine environment. Most importantly, I am determined to see that a more

sustainable approach to the marine environment is taken, so that Northern Ireland can continue to benefit environmentally, economically and socially from the resources that the sea has to offer. For that reason, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL] dealing with marine planning, marine licensing, the repeal of spent or obsolete fisheries enactments, and enforcement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I propose to suspend the sitting until that time.

The sitting was suspended at 2.22 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Farm Modernisation Scheme

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the farm modernisation scheme was raised at Executive level or approved by the Executive. (AQO 2166/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development did not bring the farm modernisation programme to the Executive for their consideration. However, she provided the Executive with an update on recent developments at their most recent meeting on 26 February 2009.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that queues forming outside agricultural offices was a most unusual and unprecedented occurrence, will the decision on procedures for future funding rounds be for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development alone to take?

The First Minister: That question has two aspects. First, the European Union is keen to ensure that the methods used for the distribution of such funds include a selection process. Therefore, the Executive are reviewing the mechanism. The Minister has brought the issue to the Executive and said that she wants to consider how improvements can be made in future. Everyone has heard farmers' reaction — they felt that the process was demeaning. We must have a system that ensures that the people who need the money get the money.

However, the farm modernisation programme is a positive story, to the extent that so many applicants came forward. Approximately 9,000 applicants were prepared to invest a significant amount of their own money in improving farms and modernising their farm base. The Executive will, however, examine not only the method of distribution but the means of allocation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. As he and Mr Gallagher said, there has been much concern about the funding for the programme, and legal issues are part of the problem. However, is it not the case that, politically, a Minister who has secured

the agreement of the Executive is in a much stronger position than a Minister who acts as an individual?

The First Minister: That is so, and, as the Member knows, I am a champion of collective responsibility and of bringing as many issues as necessary to the Executive. However, we must recognise that were every Minister to bring all his or her departmental decisions to the Executive, we would spend most of our time in Executive meetings.

When such decisions involve policy or relate to major issues that require an interface with the community, there is a strong argument for a Minister's bringing those matters to the Executive to secure a collective decision. The Assembly should recognise that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development sought a process that would make the application for funding as simple as possible, rather than one that required a form that ran to dozens of pages, and there was merit in that element of her approach. The aim is to achieve that merit and remove some other facets that contributed to the downside of the methodology that was used.

Mr K Robinson: I listened carefully to the Minister's responses. Does he agree that a centralised approach to relations with the European Union, to include, perhaps, the formation of a dedicated EU relations Committee in the Assembly, would help to avoid the unfortunate scenes that we all witnessed? Farmers were forced to queue overnight because of the unique approach that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her officials took to European grant aid.

The First Minister: The Executive, and the Minister, will be happy to consider all available options. There will be two further tranches of funding, and, therefore, we will consider every option. I will draw the Member's suggestion to the Minister's attention.

It is important to recognise that funding for farm modernisation can be used quickly; in fact, its use is time limited. Therefore, it helps to boost the Northern Ireland economy. The money must be distributed and used as quickly as possible, but in a manner that is transparently fair. A system in which whoever can arrange to queue for the longest period gets the money has serious downsides.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a more positive note, and the First Minister has already touched on this point, can he update the Assembly on the economic benefits of the farm modernisation scheme?

The First Minister: I never thought in the early part of my career in east Belfast that I would be answering questions on agriculture; the longer I speak, the more quickly I might use up all my available knowledge on the subject.

As I understand it, the modernisation scheme flows out of voluntary modulation, and there are three tranches of available money. My understanding is that the funding is used as a part payment to encourage the modernisation of farms, either through technologies or machinery on the farm. It encourages a farmer to use a significant portion of his own money in order to draw down that funding. A significant improvement can be made across Northern Ireland by boosting farms, which helps the economy as well as farmers.

Question Time

2. **Mr Durkan** asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to outline its proposals to allow junior Ministers to respond to oral questions from Members at Question Time. (AQO 2167/09)

The First Minister: I am back on safer ground, Mr Speaker.

In response to the Committee on Procedures inquiry into Assembly questions, we made a written submission reflecting the Executive's view on the current procedures for all Assembly questions to Ministers. Given that all procedures should be reviewed to evaluate their effectiveness in securing their aims, the Executive welcomed the opportunity to put proposals to the Committee, drawing on their experience of Assembly questions since May 2007.

As the Assembly is aware, the Executive's proposals were made public before the Committee on Procedures had received them in a deliberate attempt to generate controversy and to question our commitment to the exercise of accountability to the Assembly. That is far from the truth.

The deputy First Minister and I appointed the junior Ministers under a determination approved by the Assembly, which states that their role will be to assist us in the exercise of our functions in relation to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The junior Ministers in particular have assumed dedicated responsibility for progressing work in relation to children and young people and older people, and the scheduling of Executive business in the Assembly.

The Executive propose that junior Ministers should be able to support the deputy First Minister and me during questions for oral answer. That arrangement would be similar to that adopted by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and indeed other Secretaries of State, when they answer questions in the House of Commons and pass questions to members of their ministerial team. It would allow junior Ministers to answer questions on matters for which they have assumed responsibility and on which they would be able to speak with knowledge and authority.

The deputy First Minister and I fully acknowledge the importance of Assembly questions as one of the ways — together with evidence to Committees, private Members' motions and Adjournment debates — in which we are held accountable to the Assembly for our policies and actions. We do not believe that the proposal would dilute our accountability, and given that we will also be in the Chamber at that time, it would be difficult to construe that as neglect of our responsibilities.

We look forward to the report of the Committee's inquiry. It would be inappropriate to anticipate its conclusions, but I assure you, Mr Speaker, and Members of this House, that we will co-operate fully in implementing whatever arrangements the Assembly determines following their consideration of the report.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister for his response, and remind him that the determination was approved by a previous Assembly. If the proposal is not to have junior Ministers substitute entirely for Question Time for the First or the deputy First Minister but to assist by way of assigned questions, is it his intention that either or both junior Ministers could be available to assist him when he appears at Question Time or only his party colleague?

The First Minister: I enjoy Question Time, so the two junior Ministers are only required to answer questions on the matters specifically delegated to them. Furthermore, they are equally responsible for those matters. Therefore, when I am scheduled to answer questions, my junior Minister can answer on my behalf, and when the deputy First Minister is designated to answer questions, his junior Minister can answer in his place.

In the past several months, junior Ministers have answered probably only four or five questions that fall into the category to which the Member referred.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the First Minister's replies. Has the practice of answering questions here been compared with those in the other Administrations in Scotland, Wales and London?

The First Minister: Precisely the same system operates in the House of Commons, and I recall from an earlier debate that it was the Member who wanted British parliamentary procedures to be adopted here, so I assume that he will support the proposal.

With respect to the other Administrations, we should remember that we have a very different system of Government here. For instance, in Scotland, the First Minister is directly responsible for all Departments; whereas, each of our Ministers answers questions within his or her own bailiwick. I do not have access to the information that they use to answer such questions.

Although we are always happy to answer a wide range of questions; without being too flippant, I must point out that Members have been having problems with finding questions for OFMDFM to answer at Question Time. In the past six months to a year, questions have been asked on only five broad themes. During the last Question Time, three Members asked, and subsequently withdrew, precisely the same question, and, in another place, a further two Members asked that question. Week after week, we are being asked broadly the same questions. Our proposals to the Committee are an attempt to ensure that Members', and, through them, the public's, experience of Question Time is worthwhile and produces the best answers.

Mr Ford: I am sure that the First Minister will wish to join me in extending condolences to my good friend, and his constituency colleague, Naomi Long, whose mother died this morning.

In light of what the First Minister said about accountability and the importance of making Question Time a positive experience for all, does he agree that the issue is not so much about who answers questions, but, rather, about the quality of the answers given?

The First Minister: Of course, I join with the leader of the Alliance Party — and I know that I speak for the whole House — in expressing my sympathy to Naomi and her family circle on the sad death of her mother. I understand that Mrs Johnston had a long period of struggle, and those of us who have walked through the dark valley of having lost our mother will know how difficult a time it is. Naomi can be assured of the thoughts and prayers of everyone in the House.

With respect to the second part of the Member's question, he is, of course, right; the quality and completeness of answers are most important. Nevertheless, if people continue to ask the same questions, it is hard to give anything other than the same answers.

Mr Weir: In light of the First Minister's comments about the repetitious nature of questions to OFMDFM, does he believe that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should be required to answer questions twice as often as any other Ministers?

The First Minister: That is the issue. A test that one might apply to determine the popularity of asking questions to various Departments is what Members do when they have a completely free hand — when they submit questions for written answers.

Compared with other Departments, OFMDFM receives very few questions for written answer. In fact, some Departments receive ten times the number of natural questions that OFMDFM receives. In those circumstances, it is hard to justify why the Ministers of such Departments should appear at Question Time half as many times as those from OFMDFM.

2.45 pm

However, I know that the deputy First Minister feels the same as I do on this issue. We are relaxed and happy to abide by whatever the Committee recommends to the House and by whatever the House approves. When time is set aside for questions for oral answer, it is important that Members get the best value out of that time rather than feeling that they have to ask the same questions to fill the space available.

US Special Envoy

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the Executive have been consulted about the appointment of a US special envoy. (AQO 2168/09)

The First Minister: The Executive have not been consulted about the appointment of a special envoy. The Obama Administration have made clear that they recognise the importance of appointing someone to take over the role that Ambassador Paula Dobriansky filled until the inauguration of the new President on 20 January this year.

I record my sincere thanks and appreciation to Dr Dobriansky for the commitment that she made to Northern Ireland during the two years in which she was President Bush's special envoy here. Despite having a wide-ranging and challenging portfolio, which included climate change, human trafficking and human rights, she still devoted a significant amount of her time to supporting political and economic development in Northern Ireland. I want to record our particular thanks for her support for the investment conference in May of last year, when she led a presidential delegation of senior American executives to Northern Ireland.

Returning to the question about the appointment of a special envoy for Northern Ireland, I would emphasise that such a decision falls entirely within the discretion of the President in consultation with the US Secretary of State. The decision on who is appointed is, therefore, entirely a matter for the American Government.

Mr G Robinson: Are there any plans for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to meet the President? How does the First Minister believe that the positive relationship with the US can be built upon? I realise that I might be jumping the gun with those questions.

The First Minister: I hope that all the guns are decommissioned and that there are none to jump. *[Laughter.]* The deputy First Minister and I intend to travel to the United States soon. We will be involved in a serious tour in which we will meet representatives of companies that are engaged in Northern Ireland, talk to some that, we hope, will become engaged in Northern

Ireland, and we will have a number of meetings with political leaders. We hope to be on the east coast of America during the St Patrick's Day period. We have been invited to the White House, and we would hope, God willing, that we will be able to meet the President during that period.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With the election of Barack Obama, the new President of the United States, it is hoped that there will be a new approach by the United States to international affairs — although I have to say that its approach to Ireland has been positive. Would the Minister welcome the appointment of a US envoy to the North, and does he have any thoughts on who that envoy should be?

The First Minister: The Member has raised the second part of the question from my colleague George Robinson, which I had not answered. We have a very positive relationship with the United States, and the number of United States companies that have come to Northern Ireland and are prepared to look at Northern Ireland as a base for future business is much more significant than almost any other part of the world outside these islands. I believe, therefore, that we all recognise that there is a significant and special relationship with the United States.

Many people from different sections of our community have emigrated to the United States, so we have deep roots in that country. I am not in the business of picking either football teams or envoys — if I were to suggest someone, it might be the surest way of ensuring that they would never get the job.

Mr Gardiner: Has OFMDFM raised with the Department of State and the new US Administration the likely impact that President Obama's keep the jobs at home strategy will have on inward investment from the US to Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: On a previous visit, the deputy First Minister and I spoke about the issue of protectionism, and we were encouraged by what we heard. I am pretty sure that the direction that the new President will take in relation to encouraging investment in Northern Ireland will be just as strong and committed as that of his predecessors.

Mr Speaker: Question No 4 has been withdrawn.

Shared Future

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the action it has taken in creating a shared future since devolution. (AQO 2170/09)

The First Minister: Improving relationships between and within communities in Northern Ireland

and building a shared and better future remains a top priority for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive. We believe that our work — at ministerial level and throughout the Department at all levels — has demonstrated our commitment to building cohesive, inclusive communities. In a recent debate, we challenged our critics to judge us on our track record — that is, our actions and achievements over the past two years.

The fact that we have been delivering substantial additional funding that was secured in the Executive's Budget is just one of our achievements. We have increased funding by one third for the period 2008-2011 — from £21 million in the previous comprehensive spending review period to almost £30 million in the current one. That means that vital work on the ground and with both existing and new communities is better resourced than ever. We also want to ensure that the resources are used in an effective way; therefore, we have been assessing existing programmes and considering new approaches to ensure tangible outcomes from the funding and action.

We have increased funding to minority ethnic groups by two thirds and have increased funding for youth and interface workers by one quarter. Statistics show that the work that we fund and resource is delivering real and meaningful outcomes. Between 2006-07 and 2007-08, there was a 12% drop in racist hate crime. Likewise, there was a reduction in sectarian-motivated crimes from 1,217 in 2006-07 to 1,056 in 2007-08. In 2007, three out of five young people reported that relationships between Protestants and Catholics were getting better. However, there is no good reason to be complacent. We are leading and driving change in our society and through our work — in the Department and the Executive — so that we can deliver a shared and better future for all our people.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his reply. There is no greater problem facing this community than that of sectarianism and the division that it brings about. I acknowledge the funding that the First Minister mentioned in his answer; however, from a political perspective, the real question is what effort is being made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to eradicate sectarianism. When will they publish a strategy that really tackles the whole problem of sectarianism and division in our society?

The First Minister: When I was Minister of Finance and Personnel, I received delegations and met individual Members who spoke to me about increasing the funding for activity relating to the shared future proposals. I am fully committed to that. It was on that basis that I supported the proposal from the then First Minister and deputy First Minister for increasing the funds available. At a time when there were massive

demands on the Budget, an increase of between 30% and 33% was substantial and shows a commitment.

Although we are still working on that strategy, there is an existing strategy. We are working on the ground to obtain the best benefits. What matters is whether the indices are showing an improvement, and there are clear indications that improvements are being made in almost all areas. However, there is one unfortunate exception in relation to symbolic premises — GAA halls, Orange Halls, and so forth — where figures have increased. There is much work to be done, and we will continue with our endeavours. We take it seriously, regard it as a significant priority and look forward to the introduction of a strategy fairly soon.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for his answer. How encouraged is he that the good relations indicators are showing movement in the right direction?

The First Minister: I would be greatly discouraged if the reverse were the case. Although the indices are showing improvement, if any one of us takes our foot off the pedal, those improvements can quickly go into reverse. However, most of us know from our own experiences that the mood is better. Indeed, many polls indicate a reduction in interface tensions and community divisions, and we want to keep it that way.

In many ways, however, it is down to us to lead by example, whether as Members or as Ministers. It is a matter of respecting one another's position, recognising rights and liberties, and enjoying our own culture and way of life without any harassment, let or hindrance.

Dr Farry: Does the Minister accept that increased funding and individual actions are less effective in the absence of an overall strategy? To that end, will he explain what factors are holding up the strategy on cohesion, sharing and integration, given that a promise was made to publish a draft strategy in October 2008?

The First Minister: My view is quite contrary. The strategy is not the most important issue; the most important issue is to continue to get money down on the ground, ensure that work continues and that improvements are made. While we do that, we are working on the existing principles, so that one is never without a strategy. The fact that work continues in all those areas is, in itself, a strategy. I approve of the new strategy, and I want it come to fruition as soon as possible. I will not do anything to delay its coming before the Committee and the House.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister express his concern at the recent statements by Minister Sammy Wilson promoting discrimination based on race? Does that run contrary to his Department's equality agenda, which tackles discrimination and racism?

The First Minister: There are a number of different ways in which one could answer that question. However, people should closely examine precisely what the Minister said. He did not suggest that any individual would be discriminated against because of his or her ethnic background. He made it clear that, in difficult economic times, if everything else were equal and a decision had to be taken, the best economic decision for our country would be to ensure that our own people obtained employment. It is the duty of every Minister to ensure that equality, fairness and merit are the basis on which jobs are offered.

3.00 pm

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

1. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the success of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in international rescue competitions. (AQO 2186/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am pleased to say that teams from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service have enjoyed regular success in the past few years in the World Rescue Organisation's rescue challenge. They were fourth in the 2006 competition, which was held in Capetown. In 2007, they again secured fourth place in Barcelona. In 2008, the competition took place in Cardiff, where the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service achieved third place overall and was first in the complex-scenario category.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer. I suggest that the success that he has outlined is, in major part, due to the initiative of seven fire officers who took it upon themselves to develop the relevant skills and then to train other firefighters and officers. Their success is shown not only in the vast number of trophies that they have won, but in the lives that they have saved.

Does the Minister know whether anyone at a strategic management level in the Fire and Rescue Service is examining why six of those seven firefighters have declined appointments to the new road rescue team? Furthermore, does he know why one of those officers, after 30 years of experience, has resigned from the Fire and Rescue Service? Is that a matter in which the Minister believes he should take a direct and personal interest?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the first instance, it is a matter for the trust to manage its own affairs, including its

workforce. What I can say, and it is well-known, is that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service provides a very good service for the people of Northern Ireland. It is considered to be one of the best — if not the best — units in the UK.

The recruitment and selection process for the road rescue team would have complied with fair employment legislation, it would have followed codes of conduct, and it would have given everybody in the Fire and Rescue Service an equal opportunity to apply and to be selected. I understand that eight secondments to the road rescue team were advertised. There was a three-stage application process. Eight personnel were offered positions on the road rescue team. The offer was declined by five people and accepted by four. Consequently, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is recruiting in order to fill the four outstanding seconded places in the road rescue team.

This is the first suggestion that that I have heard that, somehow or other, the Fire and Rescue Service is not adhering to its own codes of conduct, to fair employment legislation or to following the required procedures.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister, but to follow on from his answer, will he inform the House why the leader of that highly successful team from Crescent Link fire station — who, for the past six years, has been instrumental in all matters pertaining to road traffic collisions in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service — has, despite his expertise, knowledge and skill, been deemed unsuitable for the position of team leader in the road rescue team?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That appointment is a matter for the Fire and Rescue Service. If people have complaints about how they are treated, the organisation has clearly laid-down complaints procedures. As I said, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is exemplary. It is, rightly, considered to be one of the best, if not the best, rescue services anywhere in the UK.

I have no knowledge of individuals who are team leaders or anyone else. I can say that the road rescue team has a wide remit; it does not simply follow normal practice, and there are outstanding requirements to become a member of that team. I am not casting aspersions on anyone. I cannot comment on individual cases. If individuals have a complaint, they must raise it with the organisation, its chief executive and its board.

Mr McClarty: I join the Minister in paying tribute to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

The Minister will be aware of the deep concern in the East Londonderry constituency regarding the proposal to remove one appliance from Portstewart fire station. I ask the Minister to consider the implications

of such a proposal. Is he prepared to meet me to discuss the issue further?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member will be aware that the proposal to remove the second appliance from Portstewart fire station came from a consultation recommendation. I have not yet had a chance to consider that proposal, so the position stands that Portstewart still has its second appliance. That is a matter for me to consider, and I am happy to discuss the issue with Mr McClarty as I work my way through the proposals. The Member will be aware that there are proposals from the Fire and Rescue Service and from all the other trusts. I have a great number of matters to consider, but I will certainly not allow that fire appliance to be removed without all the issues being properly weighed up.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Tommy Gallagher, who is next on the list to ask a question, I remind Members of the new procedures in the House: Members must clearly rise in their places if they want to ask a supplementary question. Some Members stand halfway up, and others nod at the Table. I know that some Members have experience of how this is done in another House, but in this House, they must clearly rise in their places if they want to be called to ask a supplementary question.

It must be pointed out also that Members who rise in their places may not be called to ask a supplementary question. However, we have a problem because some Members stand halfway up rather than standing up fully in their places, so we do not know whether they want to ask a supplementary question.

Enniskillen Hospital: Financial Arrangements

2. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the revised financial arrangements for the new hospital at Enniskillen will be in place. (AQO 2187/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The successful tenderer for the new acute hospital at Enniskillen, the Northern Ireland Health Group, has put in place the necessary funding arrangements to progress the project, which will reach financial close in spring 2009 — subject to the normal Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety approvals. The hospital will be completed in 2012.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that answer. As everybody in the Chamber knows, there is a mood of despondency in Omagh today. Many people in the Omagh area understand that the reasons for the service cuts are linked to the previous devolved Government, particularly to Bairbre de Brún, the former Health Minister. Will

the Minister assure the people of Omagh and Enniskillen that their new hospitals will be built on time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Gallagher is right to say that the strategy that the Department is following — Developing Better Services — has a historical origin. It allows for an acute hospital at Enniskillen, which I have announced and is the subject of this question. It also allows for a local, enhanced hospital at Omagh, which will cost an estimated £190 million. We anticipate that that will be ready for business in 2013.

The Enniskillen hospital will cost £260 million and will be ready for business in 2012. All things being equal, I am confident that we will meet those targets. The Tyrone County Hospital will remain open until the new hospital is ready. I have set up a liaison group in Omagh with the trust and the council so that information can be shared as we move from the old hospital to the new site.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What assurances can the Minister give to the people of Fermanagh and Omagh today — especially considering that this is a dark day for the people of Omagh as acute services were withdrawn last night — about the level of service that they will receive in the interim until the new hospitals are built?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a workforce of around 600 in the current hospital in Omagh, and there are no plans to change that. There are 300 nurses and about 50 doctors, plus all the other hospital staff. That will be the approximate number of staff required for the new hospital.

At the weekend, the acute ward was closed — and that was flagged up; people were well warned — but the rest of the hospital services will continue. The services include a 24/7 doctor-led urgent care and treatment centre; an outpatient department; 66 inpatient beds; 15 day-case beds; a health and care centre; a diagnostic department; palliative care; chronic disease management; a day-procedure unit and day-case surgery; renal dialysis; an ambulatory care service; and an acute inpatient mental-health facility. In addition, there is the chest pain clinic, the heart failure clinic and day-case cardiology. Those services supply approximately 70% to 80% of all the hospital needs of the area.

Dr Deeny: I want to ask about the funding of the two hospital projects in Enniskillen and Omagh. First, are they financed 100% through private finance initiatives (PFI)? If not, what percentages of the projects are funded in that way?

Secondly, does the Minister not have some concerns about funding such major projects through PFI, given the weight of evidence from across the water? Similar

projects in places such as Edinburgh, Coventry and Manchester have had very negative outcomes. Indeed, in London —

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

Dr Deeny: Indeed, in London, one hospital spent £10 million buying itself out of a PFI contract.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As regards value for money and affordability, the PFI project at Enniskillen has been recorded as being the best value for money, which is why it is being taken forward. The hospital will be built in 2012, and we will then have to pay a unitary charge each year until such time as the hospital fully becomes the property of the Health Service.

We are moving forward with the procurement process for the hospital in Omagh, and I am considering whether PFI or a traditional procurement route will offer the best value for money. I am required by the Department of Finance and Personnel to provide best value for money, and that is the route that I will take.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer not only on the progress being made with the new south-west hospital in Enniskillen but on the new enhanced local hospital in Omagh. What discussions has he had with the Minister for Regional Development about upgrading the A32 road between Omagh and Enniskillen?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have had one meeting with the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, which was specifically about the upgrade of the road between Omagh and Enniskillen. That meeting was held approximately a year ago, and, at that time, I had asked Omagh District Council to come along to give me its support, but it was not able to do so. However, I understand that Omagh District Council is now prepared to take up the cause. It is important that the road between Omagh and Enniskillen is upgraded in time for the two new hospitals to be completed.

Neuromuscular Service

3. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the findings in the report published by the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign in relation to the need for a specialist neuromuscular service. (AQO 2188/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am fully committed to providing appropriate care for people with muscular dystrophy and other neurological conditions that contribute to disability. I welcome the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign report, which, I understand, sets out a number of

measures to improve the care and management of people with muscular dystrophy. I wish to consider the report in detail to ensure that its findings are taken into account as my Department continues to develop services, particularly for those who need specialist neuromuscular care.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his response. I assume that the Minister has taken on board the fact that people want a specialist neuromuscular service. As the Minister will be aware, muscular dystrophy is a progressive wasting disease, and, as yet, there is no specialist paediatrician in Northern Ireland. I have outlined the two main requests in that regard, so I certainly hope that the Minister takes them on board. No doubt, I will ask him to comment on the matter again.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The report informs us, and it is very helpful. My next step is to draw up a strategy on physical and sensory disabilities, and muscular dystrophy is one of several physical and sensory disabilities that we are dealing with. The strategy will be drawn up in 2009-2010, and it will be informed by the report, among other things. I expect the report to be wide-ranging, addressing muscular dystrophy and conditions such as acquired brain injury, cerebral palsy, Huntington's disease, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, among others. There are many conditions, and the report will help us to draw up a strategy to address them.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Is he aware that there has been no paediatric neuromuscular consultant in Northern Ireland since last August, and, as a result, the care of children with muscular dystrophy is being severely compromised? Will he, therefore, meet representatives from the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign and me to discuss that much-needed service?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I recognise the challenges; that is why I said that the report is welcome and our strategy will move forward. I have announced funding of £10 million for physical and sensory disabilities, £9 million for children with complex needs, and £220,000 for neurological services, all of which is geared towards providing a service. There is also recurrent funding of £4 million for multidisciplinary teams of allied health professionals. They will all mesh together to give support for conditions such as muscular dystrophy, as well as for the other conditions that I mentioned, to get a service that meets the need. The number is large: almost 600 adults and 280 children. I am anxious that we take those issues forward. That is why I put the funding and the strategy in place. I am happy to

discuss issues with the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, with Mrs Hanna, and with anyone else who has something to contribute.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for accepting the report, which was launched last week in the Long Gallery. Does the Minister agree that adults and children with varying degrees of muscular disability would benefit from the input of a clinical psychologist to help families to develop management strategies? What action will the Minister take to ensure that psychological support is part of a multidisciplinary approach to care for people in Northern Ireland with muscular diseases?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, I have put recurring money in place for multidisciplinary teams of allied health professionals. As far as psychologists are concerned, it is a matter for the strategy to inform what we need to put in place, and then we will look to put it in place. We have identified a need, and we have to work out how to address it. That is the next step for the strategy, and I am pinning my hopes on that. If the strategy indicates that such provision is required or that an increase in provision is required, we will consider how to address that.

Cherry Lodge

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place for delivery of respite care in Randalstown, in light of the proposed closure of Cherry Lodge. (AQO 2189/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust is still consulting on the equality implications of the proposals to reform and modernise respite services. The process, which includes the proposals for Cherry Lodge, will not be completed until 6 March 2009. At that stage, the trust will examine and take into account the responses in determining what respite services will be most appropriate to meet the needs of children and adults in the Randalstown area. As the plans are not finalised and the public consultation process is still ongoing, the Member will understand that it is not appropriate for me to comment at this stage. Final decisions on any changes to respite services will not be made before the end of that process.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister not agree that his plans to reform respite care, especially with respect to Cherry Lodge — a respite home for children with learning disabilities — is seen as nothing more than pure cuts?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Let me inform Mr Burns, and anyone else who cares to listen, that these are not my

proposals: they are the proposals of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. I am required to find £700 million in efficiency savings over the next three years. The trusts must bear a proportion of that responsibility, and so they bring forward proposals. I will weigh those proposals seriously, including in terms of impact on the strategies that are in place; for example, the Bamford Review and Caring for Carers, our strategy for looking after carers. They will have an effect on how the implementation group rolls out that strategy.

If Mr Burns has a better idea, he should avail himself of the consultation process. I presume that he has put practical proposals to the Northern Trust to allow it to go in a different direction, if that is what he wants.

Dr McCrea: The Minister rightly says that the proposals are not his. However, the final decision will be his. Can he assure me that the very strong opposition of parents and families — not only in Randalstown or South Antrim, but over a very wide area — who will suffer the effects of such a closure, will be fully taken into consideration by him in his determination? What they say must not be dismissed in a paper exercise.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the consultation is genuine. This is by no means a done deal, and no decision has been taken.

My criteria are as follows: I must be satisfied that the service delivered to patients will be either maintained or enhanced. That includes the patients who are looked after in Cherry Lodge. I must point out, however, that that is a very old building that requires substantial investment. The process has yet to be completed, and I am still some way from reaching a decision. The trust has yet to come to a conclusion, and its board will not meet until the end of the month.

Everyone must understand that I must find the money. If Members do not want me to find it — if they do not want the trust to find it here — they must present alternatives. They have to be able to tell me how I can find the money otherwise. To date, no one has come forward with practical suggestions about other ways in which I can find the £700 million. These are efficiency savings.

Members know the sort of battle that I had to fight over the Budget. That £700 million must come out of my budget in efficiency savings. It should go back into providing new services for health, but only £300 million can do that. The other £400 million is required to keep the Health Service going, the light bulbs on, buildings maintained and existing services going. I am required to go through this process by the Executive and by this House. Members, including Mr McCrea, voted for that. If Members have other ideas, I will listen.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that proposals to close residential homes that offer respite facilities are nothing more than proposals, and that no final decision has been taken? Does he agree that attempts by some Members to play politics with the efficiency savings process are appalling and that all final decisions are his as Minister of Health?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Gardiner reinforces what I have just said. There is a consultation process. The trusts, in common with other parts of the service, must come up with proposals for efficiency savings. There is no other way to do it. If the savings are not contentious and there is no disagreement, I have no decision to make. However, if they are contentious and cause disagreement, I do.

I will examine closely the alternatives, because, very often, the alternatives are as unpalatable as the proposals. However, we are some way off that.

The Member made the point about playing politics with health, and, recently, we have seen plenty of that. That is absolutely disgraceful, because it amounts to waving shrouds and scaring people, and there is no need for that. All the proposals, by which I mean proposals around residential homes and other proposals, are just that — proposals.

Rapid-Response Vehicles

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of proposals to replace ambulances with rapid-response vehicles. (AQO 2190/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The proposal to replace a small number of traditional A&E ambulances with an increased number of rapid-response vehicles (RRVs) is central to our plans to deliver first-rate, twenty-first century pre-hospital emergency care to the people of Northern Ireland. RRVs have been safely in use in Northern Ireland since 2003, and the introduction of more will improve the Ambulance Service's response to the most serious life-threatening emergencies.

Research evidence shows that response time is crucial. For every minute that elapses between cardiac arrest and the start of resuscitation, survival rates reduce by 10%. Therefore, the use of faster RRVs, a tried and tested model of service delivery that is common in the rest of the UK, has the real potential to save lives. Better response times mean better outcomes for patients, and on that basis, my assessment of the introduction of more RRVs is positive.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his reply. I very much appreciate the new investment that is going into the Ambulance Service. However, I am concerned

about the form of service that will be provided in some areas of my constituency, such as Glenarm and Carnlough — in fact, throughout the glens of Antrim — which are some considerable distance from the nearest hospital. Will the Minister tell me how decisions will be made on the type of vehicle to be used for call-outs in such areas?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process is that on receipt of a 999 life-threatening call, an ambulance is sent out. If an RRV is dispatched, an A&E ambulance is sent out immediately afterwards. The A&E ambulance follows on from the RRV. The RRV will not be at an ambulance station but out on the road. The proposal means that more vehicles and, consequently, considerably more paramedics, who are the key personnel, will be on the road.

In any A&E ambulance, there is a medical technician, who drives the vehicle, and a paramedic. In an RRV, there is a paramedic. All the equipment in an A&E ambulance and in an RRV is exactly the same. However, an RRV will not take people to hospital — it will rely on an A&E ambulance to do that. That is the process. There is strong evidence to show that an RRV can answer a call more quickly. The whole proposition is to get paramedic support quickly to the patient, and, after that, to stabilise the patient and give them support.

Mr Craig: Can the Minister confirm or deny that there are plans to remove day-cover ambulances in Lagan Valley in the 2009-2010 financial year? That appeared on the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service website but was quickly removed. Can the Minister confirm that as part of the drive to make efficiency savings, doctors' urgent calls are no longer being responded to by emergency ambulance staff?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer Mr Craig to my previous answer. Ambulance Service proposals went out to consultation. The consultation period is over, and the service is now considering, and deliberating on, the responses received. When that is done, and a board meeting has taken place to firm up proposals, the Ambulance Service will come to me. I will then be in a position to make a decision. I must say that I do not think that speculation, one way or the other, is entirely helpful.

Mr Molloy: Can the Minister explain whether the proposal will mean a reduction in Ambulance Service personnel? Is it a proposal to improve the quality of the Ambulance Service, or is it a proposal to meet the 3% reductions?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I missed the last part of that, but I heard at least one of the questions. Paramedic hours will rise from 538,000 in 2007-08 to 600,000 in 2010-11. That is a 12% rise. The number of paramedics

who are employed will rise from 362 to 422, which is a considerable increase in the workforce.

The budget of £57 million is an increase, and the capital budget is at a record level. I have announced £100 million over 10 years, including £17.4 million over the current three-year comprehensive spending review period. In the next three years, that will allow the Ambulance Service to buy 60 accident and emergency ambulances, 60 patient care ambulances and 26 RRVs. That is an unprecedented investment in the Ambulance Service. Demand for the Ambulance Service is rising all the time and is rising very quickly. Investment must be made and new ways must be found of addressing the issues that the Ambulance Service faces.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing: Resource Allocation

1. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development what proposals she has brought forward to the Executive for greater resources to be allocated to housing. (AQO 2206/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): On 27 November 2008, I submitted a paper to the Executive that described how investing in social and affordable housing could provide a necessary stimulus to the Northern Ireland economy. Increased investment in social housing can have a profoundly beneficial effect on the economy in a relatively short period of time. Increasing the building of social housing can create many new jobs and sustain many new ones in the construction industry.

The circumstances do exist to secure excellent value for money in social newbuild as sites now cost less and construction work is increasingly keenly priced. The collapse in house and land sales has left the Northern Ireland Housing Executive facing a serious shortfall of a magnitude of £100 million in each of the next two years. That could have a devastating effect on the newbuild programme. My belief is that we should build more homes than were originally planned. As things stand, we are set to build substantially fewer. That is unacceptable to me.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister on her answer. Will she elaborate further on that? Does she share my view that the additional investment in social housing can help to counter the impact of the economic downturn?

The Minister for Social Development: I share the Member's concern and analysis. Increased building of social housing can create many new jobs and sustain existing jobs in the construction sector and ancillary service industries. As we all know, house building is

labour intensive and is a consumer of considerable quantities of locally sourced materials. House building offers a higher multiplier than larger infrastructural projects, which tend to be more capital intensive. As social housing is dispersed all over Northern Ireland, the consequent boost to employment is spread geographically. As social housing is targeted at areas of greatest housing need, the newbuild tends to occur in areas of relatively high unemployment where the jobs that are created have most impact.

In a falling market, the circumstances exist to secure excellent value for money in social newbuild. Housing associations, for example, were priced out of the market in many instances prior to the correction. Sites are costing less, and construction work is increasingly keenly priced. For the sake of jobs, the construction sector and the economy, before we even consider the needs of those in housing stress, there is a pressing need to build more houses.

Mr K Robinson: I see that the Minister is on her hobby horse. All Members would agree that that is where she should be. *[Laughter.]* That was a compliment.

Can the Minister detail the effect of current fiscal constraints on her Department's maintenance programme, with particular regard to the impact on elderly and disabled people? Can I remind the Minister — not that she needs to be reminded after that last speech — about the important social housing scheme in Monkstown in my constituency, which requires pushing forward?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Robinson for his question and remind him gently that decisions will be taken shortly on the social house-building programme for the next year, notwithstanding funding difficulties. As regards the first part of his question, the matter is part of the pot that is due to be considered during the next few days in relation to the Housing Executive's programme for planned maintenance schemes.

Last week, at my colleague Mr O'Loan's request, I was pleased to meet a group of seven or eight "Egan" contractors, who deal specifically with kitchen replacements, heating contracts, and so on. I sympathise fully with all of those people who currently face the downturn in the market. There must be no doubt that I will consider all of those issues.

I await the house condition survey, which will tell me the impact of all of those maintenance schemes during the past number of years; the value of investing in planned maintenance; and the actual capacity and need for that in future years. Notwithstanding that, I take on board Mr Robinson's point about investing in planned maintenance.

Mr F McCann: Can the Minister tell the House how much of her overall budget is spent on the provision of social newbuild?

The Minister for Social Development: As Mr McCann is a member of the Social Development Committee and has, therefore, had many briefings on that particular issue, he will be adequately aware of the amount of money that has been invested in the social house-building programme.

Mr Easton: As regards the Minister's comments on maintenance schemes, even minor schemes to repair windows and doors in my constituency of North Down are not being carried out because, according to people in the area, there is a lack of money in the budget. Indeed, pensioners who live in the Ballyree Drive area of the Bloomfield estate in Bangor have had their scheme put back for the past two years. Those pensioners, many of whom have disabilities, are living in damp conditions. What does the Minister intend to do to try to help those people?

The Minister for Social Development: First, I suggest to Mr Easton that if he gives me particular details of that case, I will be happy to look at it.

The issue lies with the housing budget, about which a debate must take place. I say clearly — and make no apology for doing so — that there must be a re-profiling of the Budget, because the assumptions that underlaid the original Budget are no longer valid. Why is that? Because there is now an economic downturn and a credit crunch. Those conditions were not foreseen — neither their breadth nor depth — at the time of the Budget in January 2008. Therefore, it must be re-profiled.

The Assembly must also ensure that social house-building programmes, including planned maintenance, are put on a sound financial footing and that my Department is no longer reliant on a hand-to-mouth existence that depends on its being able to obtain money through quarterly monitoring rounds.

Therefore, once and for all, I ask Mr Easton's party to ensure that the Minister of Finance and the wider Executive put housing on a more stable financial footing. I have made that case and will continue to do so.

Warm Homes Scheme

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Social Development if all previously approved warm homes schemes will still go ahead as planned. (AQO 2207/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Members will be aware that the warm homes scheme has been successful in recent years and is popular. The budget that is available for the scheme has been fully committed for the current financial year.

My Department is on track to meet its public service agreement target to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures. I am sure that the Member, and other Members in the House, will recognise that the scheme has made a significant contribution to the alleviation of fuel poverty.

During the June and December monitoring rounds, I submitted a bid for additional resources in order to clear the waiting list. Unfortunately, neither bid was met. Some of the outstanding referrals for assistance will be carried forward and assessed under the new criteria, and I expect the majority of outstanding referrals under the warm homes scheme to receive assistance under the new scheme. However, I have asked officials to examine the scope for extending cover for those who have been on waiting lists for a long time, and who have a reasonable expectation of an approval, but who might miss out under the new arrangements. The Member has written to me about several constituents who have had problems with the warm homes scheme.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that response, in which she mentioned the delays. I wrote to the Minister, and I thank her for a full and frank response. However, the delay in rolling out the warm homes scheme is causing problems, and she referred to how she will deal with that matter in her response. I welcome that. The Minister can add her comments.

The Minister for Social Development: I fully appreciate what the Member is saying, and other Members have written to me about the delays. I want to reassure Members — particularly Mrs McGill — that I have asked officials to examine the scope for extending cover for those who have been on waiting lists for a long time, and who have a reasonable expectation of an approval, but who might miss out under the new arrangements. As Members will know, the scheme has been very popular since it was introduced in 2003. In fact, it has impacted favourably and positively on many households.

Mr Speaker: Before I call a Member to ask a supplementary question, it is important that Members, if possible, ask the Minister questions, rather than make statements.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister has answered my question. I am happy enough. *[Laughter.]*

Dr W McCrea: It is correct to state that the warm homes scheme is, and has been, very popular. Therefore, it is vital to ensure that as many people as possible across Northern Ireland are able to enjoy its benefits. Will the Minister assure the House that, if those applicants who have expectations — because they have been on the waiting list for a long time — are

forced to reapply, they will not be forced to endure long waiting lists before the warm homes scheme is implemented in their homes?

The Minister for Social Development: Naturally, I do not want to raise particular people's expectations, but I assure the House that I have asked officials to examine the scope for extending cover for those who have been on the waiting list for a long period of time, and who have a reasonable expectation of an approval, but who might miss out under the new arrangements. I emphasise that the warm homes scheme has been a huge success and has kept many households out of fuel poverty. However, as it accumulated quick wins, we actively considered how to refocus the scheme so that it would target those in greatest need as well as those for whom the biggest energy efficiency gain could be captured.

Mr Burns: I congratulate the Minister on the huge success of the warm homes scheme. *[Laughter.]*

In what ways, and for what reasons, is the warm homes scheme being refocused?

The Minister for Social Development: Despite fear of repeating myself, I will do it anyway. The scheme has been a huge success, and all Members from all parties can catalogue and document the numbers of people in our constituencies who have benefited from it and who, if it had not been introduced, would not have received such benefit.

As I said, it accumulated quick wins — we have already been considering how to refocus the scheme so that it targets those in greatest need, as well as those areas where the biggest energy efficiency gains can be captured.

The Department for Social Development is not the only one to take that view. The Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, although recognising the success of the scheme, agreed that the existing eligibility criteria provided assistance for some people who were not in fuel poverty while excluding others who were. Change was therefore needed to refocus the scheme. For that reason, from spring of this year the eligibility criteria will be changed to include families in receipt of working tax credit, who will now qualify for assistance to improve heating in their home. That is another measure to reduce and alleviate fuel poverty.

My Department has accepted all the Audit Office recommendations, and had already proposed changes to the present scheme. We recently finished a consultation exercise on the proposed changes, and more than 90% of respondents supported changing the eligibility criteria. In changing the criteria, lone parents and low-income families will qualify not only for insulation measures but for heating measures, thus improving what we all want to see: the energy efficiency of their homes.

3.45 pm

Employment and Support Allowance

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for the new employment and support allowance have been processed since it replaced incapacity benefits.

(AQO 2208/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Employment and support allowance (ESA) replaced incapacity benefit and income support paid on the grounds of incapacity for new applicants from 27 October 2008. By 27 February — Friday of last week — 4,725 new claims had been processed. Overall, the introduction of employment and support allowance has gone well, and I commend staff for the progress made to date. They have coped well with the new benefits systems and procedures, and are clearing claims more quickly than the time taken for the old incapacity benefit.

That achievement is despite much higher levels of telephony interest than anticipated at the development stage, which necessitated the rapid deployment of additional staff. There was a similar experience in other parts of GB and, as a result, the number of calls answered by the employment and support allowance centre has increased dramatically. In the week ending 23 January, the employment and support allowance centre answered 2,226 calls; last week, it answered 4,117 calls.

In addition, at the request of the honourable Member Mr Shannon, and of other Members, I have ensured that Members of the Assembly, MPs and their offices have access to a dedicated enquiry line to enable Members to make timely representations on behalf of their constituents.

Mr Shannon: Thank you very much, Minister. From this side of the Chamber I also congratulate you, and hope that that sincerity can be accepted by everyone, including Tommy Burns. I congratulate the Minister on putting resources and officers in place, as that helped to alleviate people's concerns.

One of the reasons that the issue was brought to the Minister's attention was that people had to wait 54 minutes or 52 minutes to get through to the main desk — those were the two examples that I mentioned. The Minister told us how many people have been responded to. Can she confirm that the waiting times for those involved has decreased, that the number of days taken for the application to be processed has also decreased, and that those who have had problems with the new scheme are now more satisfied?

The Minister for Social Development: I hope that claimants and potential claimants are now more

satisfied than they probably were when the scheme began. Many Members contacted me about the time that it took to get through to employment-and-support-allowance office personnel via the telephony system. I acted quickly on that, and recruited and appointed 18 new members of staff.

I am pleased to say that, although the average clearance time for an ESA claim in January was approximately 10 days, it is now somewhat less than that. The average waiting time to get through to the ESA centre has now reduced considerably. That compares favourably with performance in mid-January, when the average waiting time was obviously a great deal longer. People are now being dealt with in a beneficial way, and their enquiries are being answered. Applications are being processed, but, most importantly, money is flowing to those who have applied for it.

I am happy to listen to issues that Members raise concerning individual constituents, or on general policy matters. The important thing is that we have proved that the telephony system works; that people like using the system; and that they can have their applications processed without having to fill in a form themselves.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister plan to extend the freephone service that is currently enjoyed by BT landline callers to mobile phone users?

The Minister for Social Development: I am sure that the Member is fully aware of the benefits of telephony in the same way in which, in his past, he was aware of the benefits of face-to-face contact. It takes a combination of various means of accessing a service to produce benefits for people.

The Member asked about extending the freephone service to mobile phone users. Customers who access the service from a BT landline or a mobile phone may be charged by their network provider for the connection to the BT number. It is important to point out that there is nothing to prevent a person who uses a mobile phone from getting through to the service and having an enquiry dealt with.

If Mr Brady or any other Member wishes to raise —

Mr Brady: It is about the cost of using a mobile phone.

The Minister for Social Development: I take on board what Mr Brady said about the cost of using the service. My Department will evaluate the system, but if he or any other Member wishes to raise any issues, documented evidence must be produced. It is only on that basis that we can make changes — if, indeed, changes are required. I am sure that the Member will provide that if necessary.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister take this opportunity to reassure people who have long-term

disabilities and special needs, and the families who care for them, that the new assessment process for the employment and support allowance will not result in those people having to participate in work or training that they cannot do?

The Minister for Social Development: That goes back to the debates that we had in the Chamber on the Welfare Reform Bill. At that time, I gave assurances, following much research and investigation, that anyone who had particular difficulties would not be forced into work-type situations. If the Member has any evidence to the contrary, or has evidence to suggest that any of his constituents is experiencing certain difficulties, I ask him to let me know. I assure him that any such instances will be investigated fully and dealt with.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Dwellings for Pensioners/Disabled People

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development what impact the current economic climate is having on the provision of dwellings for pensioners and disabled people in East Derry/Londonderry. (AQO 2210/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is too early in the review of the Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that may be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget, because of the virtual collapse of house and land sales. However, there is no doubt that the huge hole in the housing budget will affect newbuild across Northern Ireland. If Members want me to deliver the housing improvements in their constituencies for which they continue to lobby me, the Executive must find additional resources.

With projected shortfalls in capital receipts of approximately £100 million in each of the next two years, it is clear that I cannot meet all demands with such a gap in my Department's budget.

I was more than happy to visit housing in East Derry with George Robinson last year. I know that he has a genuine concern for his elderly and disabled constituents, but the provision of more housing is about money. As I said to Members earlier, I believe that we should allocate resources to build more houses than planned, not fewer.

Mr G Robinson: When the Budget is eventually sorted out, can the Minister give assurances that the refurbishment of pensioner and disabled dwellings will be given priority?

The Minister for Social Development: I am glad that the Member acknowledged that the Budget needs to be sorted out. Shortly, I will announce the social

housing development programme for the next year. Inherent in that will be the programme of work that the Housing Executive will undertake in respect of planned improvements and maintenance. Again, that work is predicated and contingent on the amount of resources that will be available.

Suffice to say, it is important that we put social housing, in all its aspects and formats, on a sound financial footing by ensuring that it is not reliant on quarterly monitoring rounds. That means that the Budget needs to be re-profiled, because the assumptions that underlay the original Budget are no longer valid. Conditions are now prevailing — namely the economic downturn and the credit crunch — over which neither the Assembly nor the Executive have any control.

Mr McClarty: What guarantee can the Minister give that supported housing will receive adequate funding, particularly in view of the current economic climate?

The Minister for Social Development: Over the past couple of years, I have had the opportunity to visit many supported housing projects, and I know that there are many more in the pipeline. The bottom line is that I would love dearly to support and fund supported housing projects. However, in order to do that, I require an adequate budget and the support of the Assembly, Members and, in particular, my colleagues in the Executive. I require that support to ensure that social housing — including the important element of supported housing — is put on a secure financial footing, because that will enable us to help people who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or disabled.

It is important that my budget is given that sound financial footing and that it is re-profiled to make housing the number one priority, because that will provide much-needed stimulus to the economy by enhancing a valuable housing asset, providing a new valuable asset and providing much-needed jobs in this economic downturn.

Mrs M Bradley: What innovative approaches does the Minister have for the provision of social housing in general?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mrs Bradley for her question. Many innovative solutions are available to us. Recently, I held discussions with representatives from the Emerald Fund. We also had representatives from the European Investment Bank come to Parliament Buildings.

There has been a broad range of innovations in housing. First, equity sharing has been introduced for Housing Executive tenants. Secondly, the housing association grant has been stretched by 10%. Thirdly, Co-ownership Housing has, for the first time, raised private finance through the Bank of Ireland and, quite recently, through the Ulster Bank. Fourthly, my Department recently announced the purchase of 112

ex-military houses at Pond Park, Lisburn, with the least cost to the public purse. Fifthly, we have developed a procurement strategy for housing associations.

Sixthly, my Department has developed a consultation document for the introduction of a mortgage rescue scheme. Seventhly, I am negotiating relaxations for social housing newbuilds in rural areas with representatives from the Emerald Fund. Eighthly, we have spoken to developers about large-scale leasing. Ninthly, my Department has introduced developer contributions for when we enter the economic recovery phase. Tenthly, we have undertaken a major stock condition survey in order to lower maintenance costs. All those measures are aimed at bringing innovation to social house-building.

Social Housing

6. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the anticipated increase in home repossessions in 2009, what impact this is likely to have on the demand for social housing.

(AQO 2211/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of people on the waiting list for social housing has increased by 50% in the past six years to more than 40,000. During the last quarter of 2008, the courts issued 939 writs and originating summonses.

That is a 73% increase in the number of mortgage cases received compared with the same period in 2007. I recognise the threat posed for people who live here, which is why I announced my desire to develop a mortgage-rescue scheme to help people stay in their own homes. I have done the work that I said I would do; my Department developed detailed proposals, which we put out for consultation.

4.00 pm

Following consideration of the consultation responses, we had a fully tested scheme ready to go by 21 November 2008. Unfortunately, I am not prepared to launch that innovative scheme without funding. I do not want to raise expectations until I know that I am in a position to help. I have made bids in year during the monitoring rounds, but they have not been successful. When the funds are made available, the scheme will be launched.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you make a ruling on whether the Minister for Social Development treated my party colleague Fra McCann with disrespect when she refused to answer his supplementary question because he is a member of the Social Development Committee?

Mr Speaker: I have said continually in this House that it is up to Ministers how they answer questions. I

have made it clear that I will not sit in judgement on how a Minister answers a question. To get involved in that would be a minefield, and I do not intend to do it. As I have also said continually, I am happy to talk to Members outside the Chamber if they are not clear about rulings in the House. I am happy to take up the Member's point of view if he comes and talks to me outside the Chamber.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Consultation on the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's arrangement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving and winding up a motion on a Committee report, up to 15 minutes will be allowed to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on the Consultation on the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy is about people; people who live in some of the poorest neighbourhoods throughout Northern Ireland. Such areas are generally characterised by high unemployment, poor educational attainment, poor health, shorter life expectancy, low economic activity, higher crime levels and infrastructural problems. That is a long, long list of the problems that affect the people of those areas, who, incidentally, come from all sections of our community.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy was meant to be a new beginning for those particularly deprived areas. It was to be a break from the project-led interventions that typically focused on a single issue and for which funding was only secured in the short term.

Neighbourhood renewal started with great fanfare and much expectation. There were to be floor targets, which would establish a deprivation baseline for each of the identified areas. There were plans for concerted action involving partnership between key Departments. With the Department for Social Development (DSD) firmly in the lead and making a long-term commitment to the strategy, there was also enthusiastic buy-in among community groups from the target neighbourhoods.

That sounds like the preamble to a great success story; I only wish that it was. I wish that we were here to congratulate the Minister and her Department, and to list the successes and hard-won achievements of a well-delivered strategy. Unfortunately, the Committee is not here to do that, but to advise on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy and to make useful recommendations that we hope will salvage this important piece of work.

The Committee accepts, as I expect the Minister to say, that neighbourhood renewal is not yet finished. She may argue that now is not the right time to review and judge the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. Perhaps the Minister will suggest that the debate should take place in a year's time or when the review of public administration (RPA) is complete. The Committee believes that now is the time to review the implementation of that strategy.

The Committee has devised helpful suggestions that, if adopted, could rescue the strategy for neighbourhood renewal now and deliver the outcomes that everyone wants in the not-too-distant future. The Committee's report is fairly lengthy, and I thank the Committee staff for their painstaking work in recording the evidence and producing the report. Rather than covering the entire report, I intend merely to highlight a few points.

I mentioned success, and anyone who is in business, or who has managed a project or been involved in politics, knows that the key to success is to know what one wants to do. In the case of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, that means setting meaningful area-specific targets. The strategy was supposed to set local targets based on individual areas' specific problems. Indeed, the Committee found that similar projects in the rest of the United Kingdom had set such targets.

It is wrong to suggest that all neighbourhood renewal areas are the same, because, as Members will attest, they do not all have the same problems and requirements. It is therefore wrong to produce a set of one-size-fits-all targets for neighbourhood renewal. Whether those targets refer to reducing antisocial behaviour, dealing with low educational attainment, or tackling poor economic activity, each area has its own character and will, therefore, require a customised solution driven by an area-specific target. The Committee recommends that the Department think again about setting area-specific targets that have meaning and resonance in neighbourhood renewal areas. Such targets will be the key to monitoring progress and ensuring that scarce resources are well spent.

As I said, success is based on knowing what one wants to do, but it is also dependent on money. Everyone knows, and is tired of hearing, about the credit crunch and the limitations of the Budget. The Chamber frequently echoes to the sound of Members' sincere appeals for money to fund truly vital projects. The Committee accepts that the Department for Social Development and other Departments must meet their PSA targets. The Committee acknowledges the stringent limits to Departmental budgets and, therefore, recommends that funding Departments refocus their spending on neighbourhood renewal areas.

Why should they do that? The answer is simple: Departments will get more for their money in those

areas, which, based on certain key deprivation measures, lag substantially behind the rest of Northern Ireland. If, with DSD in the lead, Departments focus on those areas, they will make a substantial difference to those measures of deprivation. The upshot of focused investment will be a significant and positive impact on related departmental public service agreements (PSA) targets. The Committee firmly believes that if funds are ring-fenced for neighbourhood renewal, those on the ground will get the measure of the Assembly's commitment to improving the lives of ordinary people. I suggest that people want devolved Government to correct what they may regard as the errors of direct rule, and to make a measurable difference to those most in need.

Another component of the successful business or good administration is appropriate governance. Having a plan and having money is great, but to ensure success, one must make sure that everyone knows what they are doing and what is expected of them. In order to deliver neighbourhood renewal, the Committee requests that the Department needs a better governance model.

As it stands, the Minister cannot compel partner Departments to spend any money on neighbourhood renewal. Other Departments can choose to leave neighbourhood renewal projects without any funding at all. The experience of departmental caprice, where funding is unexpectedly withdrawn, does nothing for confidence in the Assembly. Clearly, that is not a good way to manage an important strategy.

The Committee recommends that a new governance model is adopted. A model that includes Executive Ministers exists for other strategies. If a similar approach were adopted for neighbourhood renewal, the Committee believes that it would reinforce the Minister's role as leader of neighbourhood renewal. Good governance would also secure some much-needed stability for the funding of the strategy.

The Committee has made a sincere attempt to make helpful recommendations on the neighbourhood renewal strategy, and hopes that the Minister will consider the report in that light. The Committee is pleased to note that the Minister appears to have adopted, at least in part, its final recommendation in respect of the so-called category-two projects. I take that as a positive sign, and am, therefore, hopeful that the Minister will adopt all or most of the Committee's other recommendations.

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 of the Minister on the Committee's recommendations.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht an thabhairt don tuarascáil seo. I support the report. In keeping with the

remarks of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development Committee, I pay tribute to the current and former staff of the Committee, who provided excellent support, guidance and skill in producing what Members would agree is a very substantive report. I also record my gratitude, and that of my party, to the many individuals who appeared before the Committee in preparation for this report. Their evidence certainly speaks for itself.

Sinn Féin has been, and will continue to be, a strong advocate for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal, which is fundamentally about addressing social deprivation through a range of services and support.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy was launched in 2003. Central to that strategy is the overall objective to improve the quality of life for residents in some of the most deprived areas across the North. It is about providing services through a joined-up approach, with the Department for Social Development taking the lead. The four core objectives of the strategy included community renewal, economic renewal, physical renewal and social renewal. In short, those objectives dealt with improving the quality of life, economic activity in urban areas, the creation of safe and attractive communities, and better co-ordination of public services.

Woven throughout the report, and its 16 recommendations, are six areas for consideration. Those are in the executive summary, and I think that they make very interesting reading, even for people who do not sit on the Committee for Social Development but who have an interest in how joined-up delivery can work.

As the Deputy Chairperson pointed out, there are issues relating to targets, particularly how they are progressed, and how they are measured against, and directly linked to, specific deprivation indicators. That has proven to be very important, and groups have continually argued that the targets need to match the links with deprivation. Indeed, the action plans that all neighbourhood renewal partnerships have developed need to be central in addressing such deprivation.

The Deputy Chairperson has mentioned that deprivation is not the same across all our communities. Where it exists, however, we need to tackle and address it. There was a constant theme of a need for quick wins when this project was progressed. That is central in developing community confidence and the commitment to neighbourhood renewal.

DSD has committed funds to neighbourhood renewal, and there is growing concern that other Departments have not committed to that strategy.

4.15 pm

The entire neighbourhood renewal budget must be ring-fenced. The Committee concluded that the Department for Social Development has lacked ownership and understanding of that point, which must be pursued with more vigour by officials at every stage of the Budget process.

Governance is another area in which the Committee identified many weaknesses. Since devolution, only two interdepartmental meetings have taken place. That record must change radically. DSD has the lead role, and it must lead by example and pursue other Departments' officials to ensure that their Departments meet their ongoing obligations to the overall neighbourhood renewal project.

In preparation for the transfer of responsibilities to local councils, it is important that a community planning framework be made available to deal with wide-ranging consultation before the transfer.

In November 2008, in Minister Margaret Ritchie's presentation to the Committee for Social Development, she stated that she was considering how resources would be transferred and the equality mechanisms that could be devised before transfer. Ensuring that the budgets to be transferred are equality proofed in order to address deprivation has been a key consideration for Sinn Féin.

Furthermore, the Committee was concerned that all the years of work by partnerships in bringing people to the table should be reflected, and incorporated, in any new transfer procedure. Local people, having worked on the development of the action plans, must not be ignored when the plans go to the councils. It is critical that the work undertaken by communities is integral to any new administrative arrangements for neighbourhood renewal.

Once again, I thank the other members of the Committee for Social Development, even those from the Minister's party, who, at times, must have felt a bit tetchy. We want to ensure that the resources are reviewed — the time is right to do so — and that they go to those most in need. I support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to speak. The neighbourhood renewal strategy is underpinned by a desire to improve the quality of life of residents in the most deprived 10% of wards in Northern Ireland, affecting 280,000 people.

There is no question that that laudable aim should be the role of Government. The only question is how we should measure deprivation in order to determine whether the strategy is succeeding and how partnerships should be set up to achieve the desired outcomes.

The four main objectives for neighbourhood renewal projects are: community renewal; economic renewal; social renewal; and physical renewal. It is clear from the report that the situation is not working out as was intended, which is why it must be reviewed and modified accordingly.

At a time when every penny spent by the Government is coming under increasing scrutiny, it is more important than ever that scarce resources are spent on areas with the greatest need where they can do the most good. It is vital that those resources are seen to achieve outcomes and that they make a real difference to the lives of the people whom they are intended to help.

A key aspect that must be grasped generally is that neighbourhood renewal is not just a problem for the Department for Social Development. Too often, we have heard fine words about joined-up government, only to discover that, after those fine words, the good intentions are lost in turf wars between various agencies and Departments, some of which are keen to guard their powers and functions. Others seek to avoid problems by passing them off as someone else's. If ever there were an argument for joined-up government, surely it is this one. If we are serious about tackling deprivation and building up communities that are in difficulty, it is a job for Government as a whole.

The Department for Social Development, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning — to name a few — and local councils must play a role. A concerted, sympathetic effort and genuine commitment are required, or we will never be able to help those communities to succeed.

The rapid economic downturn and the rate of job losses mean that even more individuals, families and neighbourhoods are living in poverty and deprivation. No one is saying that the Assembly has all the answers, or that it can easily solve the problems, but the point is that these are our people, and we must try to help them.

It is imperative that the Assembly does not lose sight of why we are here: to work together for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland. The report and its recommendations can help us to perform that task. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Committee staff for their work in compiling the report and for reflecting the views of the Committee throughout its proceedings. This helpful report will assist the Department and the Minister in their important work on neighbourhood renewal. The Committee takes the view that neighbourhood renewal is an important task.

The decision to transfer the implementation of neighbourhood renewal to local councils is an important development. It has the support of the whole Committee, although some — particularly Sinn Féin members

— were reluctant to support it at its early stages. Nonetheless, there has been an important change in their policy, and now they support the transfer of the implementation of neighbourhood renewal.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for giving way. Any resident worth his or her salt who is listening to this debate will have supported us for not supporting the transfer to local councils without a budget. Does the Member agree that to expect otherwise is like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: I am sure that Members will judge Sinn Féin's position for themselves. At the Committee meetings, however, that party's initial stance was antipathetic to the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local councils. Whatever the reason, the Member has said that her party expressed that view for budgetary considerations.

Nobody, including Members from my party, suggested that the transfer of neighbourhood renewal should happen without adequate budgeting; therefore the Member's explanation is not an adequate justification for the Sinn Féin position. However, as happens in so many areas, Sinn Féin changes its position and argues that, in fact, that was its original position. I cannot fathom that. On this occasion, it is clear that there has been a change of policy, and I welcome that. It is sensible that neighbourhood renewal be implemented locally. Councillors — collectively and individually — know the best way to deal with neighbourhood problems.

However, it is important that overall responsibility for the strategy remain with the Department and the Minister. The central issue, particularly in relation to governance, which colleagues in the Committee for Social Development highlighted in the report, relates to how one can join up government with regard to tackling neighbourhood renewal and local problems.

The report will not provide a foolproof system of achieving joined-up government at a local level — there is no unique recipe to guarantee that — however, it is the best approach. Governance forms an important part of the report, and it attempts to get a memorandum of understanding between neighbourhood renewal partnerships, funding Departments and other statutory partners to ensure attendance at meetings and so forth so that everybody is brought into the local strategy.

One cannot legislate for that; it depends on the active participation of those statutory bodies and all the Departments.

Government Departments must participate in a collective fashion, in co-operation with their local manifestations — that is, statutory bodies — and they must co-operate with the Department for Social

Development, which has overriding responsibility. It is important that the report highlights that particular issue and that the Minister, the Department and the Executive should take cognisance of it.

I am running out of time, but the report very thoroughly goes through the issues of targets, budgets, communication and support, and, of course, the re-categorisation of neighbourhood renewal projects. I do not have enough time to spend discussing all those issues, but it is important that targets are realistic and suited to the problems that exist in communities. I hope that all Members in the House take the report seriously and endorse it, and I hope that the Department takes the report into consideration and deals with it seriously.

Ms Lo: As others have done, I thank the Committee staff and those who have participated in the review. I very much endorse the report. The review is very timely, given that there are so many concerns and uncertainties in communities in relation to neighbourhood renewal. I congratulate the Minister for extending the projects under category two as well, as that means that people can continue with all the good work that they have done on those projects. It is important that all the funding Departments in category two now start to meet up with the projects to see how those projects can be mainstreamed into the Departments' work.

I was on the South Belfast Partnership Board when the neighbourhood renewal strategy was introduced. The organisation that I worked with, the Chinese Welfare Association, was a beneficiary of the neighbourhood renewal capital programme. If one passes the Ormeau Road, one can see that beautiful building that has now been completed and is about to be used by the wider community as well as the Chinese community. That is a success story of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. I recall the enthusiasm at the time when the action plans were produced, when all the community groups carried out local surveys and worked with consultants. People were very excited and felt that, for the first time, a long-term and holistic strategy was being adopted to tackle the complex, multifaceted nature of deprivation in their areas.

The report has found that neighbourhood renewal has raised a lot of expectations in communities. However, with so many difficulties being experienced over the last few years in the implementation of the strategy, many people now feel disillusioned about the strategy and whether their communities have benefited from it or seen any tangible, positive changes as a result of it.

I commend the recommendations, particularly recommendations 1 to 4, which deal with clarifying targets and charting progress on agreed targets to avoid unrealistic or unachievable objectives. It might be

important to have more quick wins in order to gain the confidence of the community so that it will stay on and work towards implementing this 10-year strategy.

4.30 pm

A big issue reported by communities during the survey was lack of commitment from other Departments, and that they paid lip service only and did not come up with funding. Recommendations 5, 9 and 10 ably set out requests for additional service provision commitments with all funding Departments to be supported by ring-fenced targets, which is important if we are to have partnership-working among Departments. People cited representatives not attending meetings and not being in a position to influence decisions within their respective agencies. It is hoped that the recommendations will deal with those issues.

I am glad to see that recommendation 6 deals with the lack of clarity in relation to setting budgets in some neighbourhood renewal areas. So often, those budgets were set only by the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) with no input from the partnerships; therefore, recommendation 6 is useful.

The process for the application for funding —

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

Ms Lo: — indicated by many projects as being too bureaucratic, so recommendation 7 is very important in calling for a review.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I welcome the report and warmly congratulate the staff for the amount of work that they put into it. However, it is almost six years since the launch of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, and I am sure that many Members share my doubts as to how effective the programme has been in raising living standards in some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

I apologise for not referring to one of those areas. Twinbrook and Poleglass were in my constituency of Lagan Valley, but were removed at the last boundary change. I will, therefore, refer to areas such as Twinbrook, Poleglass and Blackstaff, which are in the South Belfast constituency. When those areas are looked at closely, in all honesty, one struggles to see the major improvements that the strategy was supposed to deliver. Bearing all that in mind, I welcome the Committee's decision to investigate the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.

Mr F McCann: Over the past few years, we have had major debates on the delivery of neighbourhood renewal and where the problems lie. Obviously, today's debate is a result of the Committee's report. However, does the Member agree that the concept of neighbourhood renewal is excellent, but that it was

delivery, and how that was approached, that caused most of the problems?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Craig: Yes. I concur with the Member's remarks, and that was what I was leading on to.

What the Committee looked at in the report was vital. It was broken into six areas: targets, budgets, governance, communication, support, and the thorny issue of transfer to local councils. Of course, I can remain totally ambivalent on that issue, because my new council area will not have one of those areas.

I want to relate my remarks to a couple of areas. First, I want to address targets — one of the major issues highlighted in the report. Ask anyone who is seeking to improve a business, and he or she will say that it is vital to set realistic targets that one can try to achieve and targets that can be aimed for and delivered on. The same is true of neighbourhood renewal schemes. It is vital to set targets that are realistic and achievable and that are specifically linked to areas, and to the deprivation factors of those areas.

In my opinion, it would be a great help if we could set targets in those areas, given that we must take local areas into account. The one thing that the report makes abundantly clear is that when it comes to targets, one size does not fit all. There are 36 neighbourhood renewal areas in Northern Ireland, and every single one of them has its own unique difficulties and problems. Ultimately, that means that there could be 36 or 360 specific targets, which is one of the headaches that must be addressed.

We must look very carefully at how those targets are set. I know that later in the debate, one of our colleagues will highlight an area in which targets were set, but, from day one, they were completely unrealistic. There was no hope of achieving them. Such a situation is not good for the whole neighbourhood renewal strategy, but it is even worse for the individuals on the ground who are trying to achieve those targets.

If someone starts on day one with the belief that their targets are unrealistic, that does nothing for the morale of the groups or people who are trying to achieve those targets. In fact, they lose momentum and motivation, and the targets just become totally visionary and unachievable. However, setting realistic and achievable targets would be the greatest motivator for the people who take part in such schemes and who want to see changes brought about in their community.

Commenting on governance in neighbourhood renewal, the report may have come from the Committee for Social Development, but we recognise that Departments other than the Department for Social Development must play a major role in delivering neighbourhood

renewal. For neighbourhood renewal to succeed, the other Departments must tie in with the strategy as a whole. The big difficulty is that although the Department for Social Development may play its part, we must ask whether the Housing Executive, health trusts and others will tie in and realistically try to deliver on neighbourhood renewal. That is a huge issue, with which I think everyone will have a difficulty. However, I commend the report to the House.

Mr F McCann: A Leas Cheann Comhairle agus a chairde. Alban Maginness discussed responsibility for neighbourhood renewal being given to councils. During a number of debates at Committee, Sinn Féin members and those from other parties had genuine concerns about neighbourhood renewal being handed to councils.

In fact, Alban Maginness was at Committee meetings in which I — and others who are councillors — raised the difficulties of possible revenue trails emerging. Therefore, he knows that that debate has taken place at local government level. He talks about original plans, but at least Sinn Féin has original plans for change. The SDLP is bankrupt of them, which is one of its problems.

I thank the Committee Clerk and staff of the Social Development Committee, who organised the consultation sessions and supplied information during the compilation of this report in order to make it a reality.

At the beginning of the neighbourhood renewal process in 2003, officials from the Department for Social Development held a number of briefings with local elected representatives in order to sell the concept of neighbourhood renewal. We were asked to use our influence to ensure community buy-in of the new strategy.

After many hours of debate, we in Sinn Féin decided to give the new strategy our support, and we said so publicly in our communities. We did that for several reasons: first, because of the promise of full community participation in the decision-making process; and secondly, because for the first time, communities would have a say in the money and resources that are spent in their areas.

Also for the first time, the establishment of new partnership boards would mean that a broad spectrum of civic life would be represented, including community leaders, business interests, educationalists, Government Departments and other stakeholders. They would come together to develop local strategies that would, hopefully, tackle the serious social deprivation that exists in many parts of the North.

Sinn Féin argued that everyone had to play their part if the strategy was to work, but difficulties arose from the outset because many Departments refused to engage seriously with the strategy, which led to the belief that it was not being taken seriously. However, I

commend the work of DSD officials, who provided great assistance in the establishment of local partnerships.

There is no doubt that neighbourhood renewal is an excellent concept. All the major players would be involved in the development of master plans to lay out the strategies dictating how social deprivation would be challenged. I also commend the excellent work of the community sector, and its commitment and dedication to those in the most deprived areas. It works at the coalface of service delivery, but it also bears the brunt of cuts when Departments are under budgetary pressures and seek easy targets. Inevitably, it is communities that suffer and bear the brunt of poor housing, drugs and alcohol abuse, low educational attainment and poor health.

When the notion of re-categorising projects was first floated, local groups were alarmed because it appeared that many of them would lose out due to funding responsibility being spread among Departments other than DSD. Although that has been temporarily resolved, we will come back to that point in 2011 unless serious negotiations about the resourcing of neighbourhood renewal take place among Departments.

The report highlights the major problems that face neighbourhood-renewal partnerships. It lays out what has gone wrong, but it also advises how problems can be overcome. We all say that social deprivation is an evil that needs to be tackled, and we all recognise that the best way of dealing with deprivation is through a partnership approach. If we agree on that, we need to support fully the implementation of the master plans that have been developed by all the partnership boards.

The Department for Social Development needs to spell out its commitment to the report's recommendations. Does the Minister know when the last meeting of her interdepartmental group took place? That was a major concern to many groups, and it is believed that the last meeting took place only because of the pressure that was brought to bear by the Committee and local partnership boards. There was also criticism that some of those from the statutory agencies who attended local partnership board meetings made no input nor gave any feedback at subsequent meetings.

The recommendations on governance are crucial if partnership boards are to have confidence in the Government's approach to promoting neighbourhood renewal. Specific designated roles and responsibilities must be agreed for the recommendations to be implemented. Recommendations 13, 14 and 15 — which deal with the community planning framework — are essential.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr F McCann: The Department needs to spell out clearly that neighbourhood renewal will be the designated

resource strategy for tackling social deprivation when transferred to local government.

Mr Newton: I declare an interest as a member of the East Belfast Partnership. I am not a member of the Committee for Social Development, so I will speak as an East Belfast representative. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for proposing the motion, and I thank the Committee staff for preparing the report.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy was warmly welcomed in east Belfast as it offered a coherent way of addressing problems that face the most disadvantaged communities. In response, the two neighbourhood partnerships in east Belfast — Tullycarnet and inner east — were among the first to deliver their action plans to DSD in 2005. Those plans were predicated on new relationships emerging between the community and voluntary sector and key statutory agencies.

I can safely say that the Belfast Regeneration Office recognised that the plans that were produced in east Belfast were strategic in nature and were thoughtfully put together, with the best interests of the community and key local agencies at their centre. To my great disappointment — and that of members of the East Belfast Partnership — the targets that were set out were not achieved. As a process, it has been almost impossible to determine what would happen when existing funding commitments that were made by the BRO across Belfast took precedence.

Although many of the projects that received funding from the BRO — by which I mean category one and, latterly, category-two posts — are important to the communities that they serve, the process — or lack of it — has made a mockery of the action-plan process.

The new relationships that were required have only developed in spite of the process, often in areas where the relationship between the community and statutory organisations existed prior to the neighbourhood renewal programme. BRO is now aware of its commitments up until March 2011; it appears that there is no additional funding available for the action plans and, indeed, no process for making any new applications for funding.

4.45 pm

For example, in August 2007, Inner East Neighbourhood Partnership secured 50% match funding from the Housing Executive to support a new post of urban regeneration officer to oversee the roll-out of the inner-east regeneration framework. That clearly represented an opportunity for the statutory sector and the community sector to work together. An application was completed and has been considered by BRO on several occasions. The application has been given approval in principle, but it is now March 2009 and there appears to be little likelihood that the project will be funded.

That sends out a very negative message to all who have been involved in the neighbourhood partnerships — community organisations, representatives from the statutory agency and the politicians in the east of the city. We need movement and investment soon, as we will even more reliant on the community sector and volunteers as the recession bites, particularly in places where the problems are extremely complex.

I fully welcome the report and the motion, and I look forward to the implementation of the report. I believe that that will benefit my constituents who live in areas of deprivation, provided that the problems that I have outlined are tackled.

Mr Brady: Go raibh míle maith agat. As has been said, the neighbourhood renewal strategy has four main objectives: renewing communities, economic renewal, social renewal, and physical renewal. In essence, the purpose of the whole neighbourhood renewal strategy was to target those areas that were most socially deprived. With the advent of devolved Government, public service agreements were revised and set. Thus, DSD, in conjunction with other Departments, agencies and public bodies, was required by 2010 to implement the neighbourhood renewal strategy, the objective being to improve the quality of life of those people living in deprived and marginalised areas. Unfortunately, the expectations contained in the strategy have largely remained unmet.

The review of the implementation of the strategy would not have been undertaken if the concerns of the neighbourhood renewal partnerships had not been raised. In its report, the Committee has taken a very sensible and pragmatic approach. Any targets for the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy should cover the main social, economic, physical and community objectives covered at the launch of the strategy. There must be a commitment of resources across a number of Departments if the strategy's objectives are to be achieved. There should also be a commitment to ring-fence funding. The current procedures are not effective in delivering the strategy.

The Committee for Social Development considered that although some targets address some of the strategy's social and economic renewal objectives, they do not address the physical or community renewal objectives as set out in the original document.

The Committee's report makes 16 recommendations, all of which are designed to improve and enhance the delivery of the strategy. I will mention three of the recommendations in particular: numbers 5, 13 and 14. There must be an agreement with all the funding Departments for additional service provision commitments for neighbourhood renewal areas. That has to be supported by ring-fenced budgets. The Department has to set out the community planning

framework that is to be used by the enlarged councils to deliver neighbourhood renewal and to ensure that there is cross-departmental buy-in.

The existing relationships between statutory partners and the voluntary and community sector organisations involved in neighbourhood renewal must be valued. DSD must set out the resources that it and funding Departments will ring-fence for the enlarged councils in support of the community planning framework and the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. Other Committee members, not just those in Sinn Féin, raised some concerns about responsibility for neighbourhood renewal being given to local councils under RPA.

Maybe Mr Maginness was not listening at that particular time. I know that he has lost his moustache, but I did not think that that would impact on his hearing. Perhaps his hearing will improve if he grows it again.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Perhaps the Member should follow suit.

Mr Brady: With respect, it has taken me 30 years to grow it, so I am not going to give it up now, but point taken. Touché.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome the work undertaken by the Committee for Social Development in preparing the report on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy and the opportunity that it presents to discuss the issue in the Chamber today. I thank Members for their contributions, and I am sure that they will appreciate that although I have read the report, I have had little time in which to consider fully its recommendations. Therefore, I do not intend to comment in detail on the recommendations today, but I will respond to the Committee in detail in due course. Nevertheless, I wish to say a few words on neighbourhood renewal and to reflect on some of the broad issues raised in the report.

Despite improvements in general prosperity and social conditions, it is estimated that 327,000 people, including 102,000 children and 54,000 pensioners, remain in poverty in Northern Ireland today, and 280,000 of those people live in neighbourhood renewal areas. Behind those statistics lie individual stories of unfulfilled potential, isolation or a lifetime of struggle just to get by. That is not acceptable to me or to the Executive, and I am sure that it is not acceptable to the Assembly as a whole.

The concentration of multiple deprivation, such as high unemployment, health problems, antisocial behaviour and low educational attainment in mainly

urban areas poses particular problems for Government. Tackling the deprivation that has persisted in many areas for decades is both a necessity and a challenge, which we must face collectively.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy is the Executive's main programme for addressing disadvantage in urban areas. The strategy, which was launched in June 2003, is an area-based approach that targets 36 of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. For the people who live in those areas, there is a much greater risk of poverty, poor health — both physical and mental — and despair, which comes from having no apparent prospect of improvement.

At the core of the neighbourhood renewal concept is the unique partnership comprising Government, local people, elected representatives and the private sector. All Departments and statutory agencies have a big part to play, and I am grateful for this opportunity to remind Executive colleagues of our collective responsibility for delivering neighbourhood renewal.

It is no secret that securing the active engagement of public-sector bodies in neighbourhood renewal has been difficult to date. I know that, and the Committee knows that, and it has acknowledged that in its report. I welcome the recommendations in the report regarding the participation and commitment from other service providers. Securing the buy-in was always going to be difficult, and although good engagement has been obtained in some areas, we have not had the same levels of success in others. My real expectation is that all of Government and their agencies play a full and active part in neighbourhood renewal for the future.

I want to be clear that neighbourhood renewal is a process requiring all parts of Government to place the needs of the most deprived people and places at the heart of their work. Although individual Departments have their own priorities and budgets, they need to take account fully of the contribution that they can make at a neighbourhood level.

We need to learn the lessons from recent attempts to address deprivation. An evaluation of New TSN is contained in OFMDFM's Lifetime Opportunities strategy. It states:

"From the evaluation it was evident that policy to tackle poverty and social exclusion was being driven through largely separate departmental programmes with little evidence of a joined-up approach at departmental level being reflected in co-ordination of services at a local level. Strategic objectives were missing and those objectives which were set, reflected departmental priorities rather than any overall government commitment to reducing poverty."

Almost a year ago to the day, I said:

"this isn't just about direct funding from my Department. ... Neighbourhood Renewal requires that all Departments support renewed efforts to improve the delivery of better services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including health, education and training.

My Department will continue to work closely with other Departments to reach agreement on funding for those Neighbourhood Renewal activities which fall under their statutory responsibility."

To date, my Department has led the development and implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. Assembling 36 representative partnerships and facilitating the production of 36 agreed action plans was not a simple task. We have endeavoured to work closely with other providers to reach agreement on long-term funding and delivery models for the provision of services. Real progress has been made in relation to a variety of new projects and service developments. However, despite some constructive discussions, limited progress has been made in reaching agreement on some important legacy projects, primarily in Belfast.

I intervened in March 2008 with an additional year of funding to save services that were at risk, build on progress and allow discussions to continue to a conclusion. I recently announced a funding package to sustain those services for a further two-year period. I have also written to my Executive colleagues, requesting their co-operation over the coming months on reaching agreement on both the priority need for the services and on delivery arrangements.

Two weeks ago, I provided funding, particularly in neighbourhood renewal areas, for 2,000 childcare places. That is also an important matter. However, a co-ordinated cross-departmental children's strategy to deal with that in the longer term is required.

My foremost priority is not about process, more discussions and more meetings: it is about delivery, bringing about improvement and making a difference to people's lives and bridging the gap between those who have and those who have not. Surely, that should be the desired objective of everyone in the Chamber.

I welcome the fact that St Paul met Sinn Féin along the way as part of its Damascene conversion to wanting neighbourhood renewal to be devolved to local councils. Did that party not think that, when I indicated that neighbourhood renewal would be devolved, it would be the operational side of neighbourhood renewal that would be devolved; that policy would remain with the Department, and that, naturally, funds would remain with operational delivery? A little more thought could have been applied in respect of that matter.

The Committee for Social Development's report makes 16 recommendations. My Department will study them all carefully and provide a full response. The recommendations relate to targets, budget, governance, communication and support, transfer to councils and the re-categorisation of neighbourhood renewal projects. I continue to challenge other Departments to put alleviation of poverty at the top of their agendas. All of the recommendations will be studied and

responded to in detail, but there are areas in which my Department has made much progress. I have secured agreements from other Departments to a range of targets for neighbourhood renewal areas: they focus on achieving improvements in health, education, employment, investment and antisocial behaviour.

5.00 pm

Work is under way to draw up a detailed evaluation framework against which progress will be measured. Investment has been made in developing a comprehensive neighbourhood-statistics website. My Department has commissioned surveys to gather feedback from the residents who live in the areas involved, and whom I want — whom I think every Member in the Chamber wants — to benefit from the implementation of neighbourhood-renewal policies and from funding that works. All that work will feed into the midterm evaluation of neighbourhood renewal, which is due to take place this year.

My Department has committed considerable financial resources to neighbourhood renewal — £60 million over the current CSR period. Although that can, and does, make a difference to the quality of life of the residents in those areas, it represents only a small fraction of public expenditure there. I firmly believe that we will make a real and lasting impact only when we develop better ways in which to mainstream services that are tailored to addressing the needs of our most disadvantaged areas.

My views on transferring the responsibility for the delivery of neighbourhood renewal closer to local government are on the record. Local councillors are best placed to identify the issues and to ensure that programmes are implemented. It is about local delivery, and about local people doing that job. The alignment of neighbourhood renewal with community planning is potentially very powerful, as that will ground key economic developments in the wider borough with the needs of the people in neighbourhood-renewal areas.

Mr Shannon: I apologise to the Minister for not being here for all her comments, but I was meeting Minister Sammy Wilson. The Minister has visited the Ards borough and the Strangford area, and she has seen at first hand the issues that affect the Glen estate, the West Winds estate, the Scrabo estate and the Bowtown estate. Does she agree that it is vital that that deprivation, which is unequalled in other parts of the Province — although I suspect that other Members may disagree — is addressed?

The Minister for Social Development: I agree with Mr Shannon that many areas throughout Northern Ireland reflect levels of disadvantage and deprivation. My Department deals with disadvantage and deprivation in three different ways: first, through neighbourhood renewal, where we consider 10% of the most disadvan-

tagged areas, and the 36 neighbourhood-renewal areas were defined from within that; secondly, areas at risk are identified, and, over the past few years, three different sets of announcements have been made; and, thirdly, small pockets of deprivation (SPODs), which surround affluent areas, are identified. Later this week, I am due to make an announcement on SPODs, in which we will define a number of areas throughout Northern Ireland. I take on board what the Member said about the Glen estate. I saw very clearly its needs and requirements.

Some Members raised particular issues. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, and time permitting, I will address those. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Hilditch, raised the issue of governance. I cannot compel other Departments to act, but I will continue to aim to persuade them, and I need the Committee to help me do that. Its report illustrates that the Committee sees a need for that to happen.

Carál Ní Chuilín asked how we can ensure that the work of the neighbourhood-renewal partnerships is not lost on the transfer of functions to councils. Again, I emphasise that policy responsibility for neighbourhood renewal will remain with the Department. With the transition to community planning, we have an opportunity to build on the progress that has been made on neighbourhood renewal. Neighbourhood renewal has given us a firm foundation for taking forward community planning.

There are community-planning pilot schemes. If councils want to, they can engage in those; if councils do not want to, that is fine. Those pilots will provide councils with an opportunity to validate the process, and they will provide us with an opportunity to evaluate the work that has been done.

Billy Armstrong raised several issues. I agree that neighbourhood renewal must address deprivation, because it is about delivery on the ground. A joined-up approach must be taken, because deprivation is not just a DSD problem. I have consistently been trying to get across the argument that there must be buy-in from all Departments.

In fact, my colleague Alban Maginness illustrated that very point when he said that neighbourhood renewal is an Executive responsibility for which DSD takes the lead.

Anna Lo mentioned the need for Departments to meet up in order to mainstream category-two projects. I completely agree about the need to work with other statutory agencies to ensure that vital services are safeguarded. It remains to be determined how that is to be done, but it may not happen via existing projects. Ms Lo and others, including Mickey Brady, mentioned the need to ring-fence budgets. However, it is not for

DSD to decide how other Departments should allocate their budgets.

In a thoughtful contribution, Jonathan Craig discussed the need to set targets. Targets have been agreed with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Northern Ireland Office. Targets are expressed at neighbourhood level, but the key document for any of the 36 areas is the action plan, which highlights issues of particular local concern. I recall Jonathan saying in his presentation that the 36 areas are unique. I could not agree more; they have distinct and particular requirements, which the action plans detail.

Fra McCann, who I notice is not in his place, raised the issue of the funding of legacy projects after 2011. Work has already started to determine how those services will be provided. Some existing projects will continue to 2011, but others will be replaced by mainstream programmes or by key statutory agencies' new initiatives. That process will free up further neighbourhood renewal investment fund money.

Robin Newton, who is also not in his place, raised the issue of there being no money left for new projects in Belfast. In Belfast, a considerable amount is spent on legacy projects, but even with that, money is available now. If he or any other Member has a particular issue with the operation and delivery of neighbourhood renewal in their area, they should let me know. I would be content to have my officials investigate such matters.

I thank the Committee and its officials for producing the report. I shall provide a full response to its recommendations in due course. I also thank my beleaguered officials who have had to help the 36 partnerships across Northern Ireland in the delivery of the process. They have had to work and engage with other Departments and obtain their buy-in, which has been a particularly difficult process for them. Although DSD is the lead Department, the issue is the responsibility of the Executive.

Finally, I wish to see delivery and improvement on the ground through the implementation of the projects. It is not about process, meetings or more reports; it is about people doing work for the benefit of their communities in order to bridge the gap between those who have not and those who have, bringing improvement, and ultimately ensuring that those areas will not require dedicated funding on a long-term basis.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I thank all the Members who spoke on this important subject, and I thank the Minister for her answers.

As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development said, neighbourhood renewal is not just about partnerships, targets, budgets, governance and outcomes. Lest anyone forget, neighbourhood renewal is really about people. It is about the people who live in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland and who represent all sections of the community. The Committee agreed that, in principle, it supported the proposed post-RPA transfer of some neighbourhood renewal responsibilities to the enlarged councils.

The strategy, after all, requires local focus. Who better than councils to deliver that? The Committee was clear that although it supported that principle, it wanted reassurance in respect of the practice. It asked for, in the first place, the Minister to set out the findings of her pilot council transfer schemes. It also asked for assurance on the transfer of resources from DSD to local councils with regard to neighbourhood renewal.

Rumours abound about how much money and how many staff will transfer under RPA for the delivery of the strategy. The Committee believes that the Minister should, as soon as the RPA timetable allows, provide clarity and begin a consultation on the matter with all stakeholders. The report also refers to decision-making paralysis on the strategy, which is particularly evident when area master plans are being produced. The Committee has recommended that the Department reviews its practices in that regard and ensures that communities' goodwill and enthusiasm is not wasted through unnecessary delay by the Department.

The question could be asked as to whether neighbourhood renewal has failed. I do not believe that the Committee is saying that, because those neighbourhood renewal partnerships that have managed to secure funding have done some good work in their areas. However, the Committee believes that the Department should take on board its recommendation so that everyone who lives in neighbourhood renewal areas will see an improvement to their lives.

The Committee's key recommendations are based on five points: refocusing of services and budgets on neighbourhood renewal areas; better governance for the delivery of the strategy; proper and relevant local targets for the strategy; extensive consultation on the proposed transfer of neighbourhood renewal to the enlarged councils; and clarity and certainty in respect of the funding for all neighbourhood renewal projects.

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I will give way. I half expected that I would have to do so.

Mr Shannon: Perhaps, he did. I am sure that the Minister — sorry — the Member, would agree —

Mr A Maginness: Not yet.

Mr Shannon: He is on his way to becoming a Minister.

I am sure that he would agree that a great number of residents and community groups wish to make a difference to where they live. All that they need is encouragement from councils — as he said — Assembly Members and DSD. With the necessary financial support, they can make a difference in their communities. Does the Member agree that those people should be encouraged?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I certainly do agree with the Member. The matter is all about encouragement. Quick wins were mentioned earlier. That is important, because if communities could see progress happen on the ground, they would be encouraged to buy into neighbourhood renewal schemes.

The Committee has consulted on the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy with key stakeholders over a long period. As the Deputy Chairperson has done, I want to thank Committee staff for assembling the evidence and producing the report. Many Members have spoken in the debate on various aspects of the report. If I can read the Committee Clerk's written notes, I will outline some of Members' comments.

Cáral Ní Chuilín highlighted the importance of local targets and the need for quick wins. She also stressed the critical importance of safeguarding community groups' effort and enthusiasm when the strategy is transferred to local councils.

Billy Armstrong stressed the need to ensure that there is co-ordinated action between funding Departments so that that action benefits deprived communities.

5.15 pm

It says in my notes that Alban Maginness "waffled", but I cannot say that. *[Laughter.]* I apologise. Alban Maginness mentioned the transfer to councils and the need for good governance in relation to co-operation among Departments. Anna Lo spoke of her experience of neighbourhood renewal in community groups. She highlighted some success stories but mentioned the need for realistic targets and better commitment from the funding Departments.

Jonathan Craig, who seems to be the Minister's favourite, identified target setting as a key step in the delivery of neighbourhood renewal and a crucial motivator to community participation. Fra McCann praised the Minister. *[Laughter.]* Fra McCann praised aspects of the Department's delivery of the strategy. Moreover, he urged the Department to improve its engagement with partnerships and to revise its governance procedures.

Robin Newton criticised the process among neighbourhood renewal stakeholders. He highlighted

his surprise and concern at the repeated delays in the funding for category-one projects that is needed to support action plans. Mickey Brady stressed that additional service provision must be supported by ring-fenced funding in neighbourhood renewal areas.

The Minister outlined the concentration of poverty in neighbourhood renewal areas and highlighted the challenges that the strategy faces. She reminded the House of the difficulty in securing the support of other Departments. That is a key factor, because if we hand the issue down to councils, we must ensure departmental buy-in across the board. If it does not work here, what assurances will we get that it will work at the coalface? It is vital that that happens. That was one of the Committee's main concerns. It was also mentioned that there had been only one or two interdepartmental meetings. That is concerning, and I hope that the Minister takes that fact on board.

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way again? I beg his indulgence.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: The Member is begging, but I will give way.

Mr Shannon: The Minister mentioned the SPOD scheme, which is a new initiative that provides an opportunity to reach out to areas that, perhaps, we have not reached before. Does the Member agree that the SPOD scheme must cover areas of deprivation that have gone unnoticed in the past?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I agree, and I am glad that the Minister mentioned that matter. It is important to consider that issue.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank all Members who contributed to this important debate. I assure the House that, in producing the report, the Committee intends to provide helpful direction to the Department on the improvement of the delivery of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. I trust, therefore, that the Minister will take proper account of the Committee's recommendations, and I look forward to receiving a detailed response on how she will address those recommendations. 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 Consultation on the Implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

Adjourned at 5.19 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 3 March 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Building Regulations (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 2 March 2009.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Public Expenditure 2008-09 February Monitoring Round

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice that the Minister of Finance and Personnel wishes to make a statement regarding the public expenditure 2008-09 February monitoring round.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): With your permission, I will make a statement regarding the Executive's decision on the February monitoring round.

As Members will be aware, the purpose of the in-year process is to help the Executive and individual Ministers to make the most of the resources at their disposal. In the more constrained financial position facing us this year, the Executive have made full use of the opportunities arising from the process, as particularly evidenced by the significant allocations made in the December monitoring round to support the local economy.

This is the fourth and final monitoring round of the 2008-09 financial year. The February monitoring round does not normally give rise to significant reallocations, and this year is no different. Following an initial discussion on 12 February regarding the overall financial position, last Thursday the Executive unanimously agreed the approach for the short period remaining in the current financial year.

As always, the starting point of the process is the identification by Departments of resources allocated in previous Budget processes, which, for a variety of reasons, will not be spent in this financial year. In this round, Departments have identified £20 million of current expenditure reduced requirements, and £4.3 million in capital investment. The reduced requirements were for relatively small amounts, across a broad range of business areas, with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and my Department surrendering the largest amounts. I have provided full details in the table attached to the circulated copies of my statement.

The level of reduced requirements declared in the February monitoring round was significantly lower than the amount surrendered at the same stage in previous years, reflecting the pattern of this year to date. Although that obviously provides less scope for the Executive to make additional allocations at this point in the financial year, more significantly, it means that Departments are achieving higher levels of delivery of public services and investment, with the latter being a real benefit to the local construction sector in these difficult times.

That lower level of reduced requirements for 2008-09 can be explained, in part, by the relatively low level of growth in the block grant from the Treasury for this financial year of 0.5% in real terms. By comparison, the block grant is planned to grow by 2.2% a year in real terms for the next two years.

As part of the management of public expenditure throughout each financial year, Departments also provide regular forecasts of their expenditure. In the latest forecast, Departments are anticipating that some £18 million of current expenditure and £500,000 in capital investment will remain unspent at the end of this year. Again, that gives a relatively positive message about the performance of Departments this year. However, it is important to appreciate that the forecasting of public expenditure is not an exact science, as the underlying programmes are, within each Department, often complex and volatile. In addition, there is a bias towards prudent forecasts, with the actual level of underspend often substantially greater than that which has been forecast previously.

The need to consider the large margin of error inherent in the forecast information that was provided by Departments was, therefore, a key issue facing the Executive in the February monitoring round. Furthermore, that issue was considered in the context of the risk of an overspend at block level against the loss of spending power from a significant level of underspend at year end. Whether the reality meets the Departments' expectations will not be known until we receive their provisional outturn information in June. However, based on the messages that we are receiving from Departments, I expect a reduction in the level of underspend compared with the position last year, although not so great as to risk an overspend for the Executive as a whole.

Evidently, the level of overcommitment with which we concluded the December monitoring round, coupled with the low level of reduced requirements and Departments forecasting almost full spend against their current allocations, meant that the ability of the Executive to make significant allocations in this monitoring round was restricted. That had been highlighted to Departments as part of the December monitoring round, which will have provided sufficient time to adjust spending plans for the remainder of the financial year, particularly given that a large portion of spend was already skewed towards the final three months of 2008-09.

However, there were two important issues to address as part of this monitoring round. The first was the commitment from the 2007-08 Budget process that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) would receive the first £20 million of available resources in the subsequent in-year monitoring processes. In order to enable the Executive to manage

the emerging pressures, that money has been spread over each monitoring round, with £15 million having been allocated to date. In order to fully comply with that commitment, the Executive agreed to allocate the remaining £5 million in this monitoring round.

Secondly, Members will also be aware of the measures that were previously agreed for funding for the response to the dioxin-contaminated feed incident, including the cost of the cull and hardship payments to local producers and processors. The original costing that was agreed by the Executive has now been revised downwards, and reflecting the ongoing and pressing needs of the local agriculture sector, the Executive agreed that any savings should be recycled into an increased hardship payment to those who were affected by the incident.

Following the £15 million that I allocated for the fuel poverty financial assistance scheme in December 2008 for 100,000 households, the Executive have agreed to extend the coverage with regard to those households in receipt of pension credit. The Executive further agreed that the matter will be dealt with when the payments crystallise. That leaves us to conclude the February monitoring round with a current expenditure overcommitment of £63.5 million — a reduction of £11 million on the December position. That is in line with our analysis of the position based on the information received from Departments and taking account of normal forecasting tolerances.

Turning to capital investment, the low level of reduced requirements, combined with a forecast of almost full spend, means that more capital projects are being taken forward. That is in line with the emphasis that we have previously placed on ensuring that public investment in infrastructure is delivered to plan. Indeed, the latest forecasts from Departments indicate that the total net capital investment this year will amount to some £1.5 billion, which will be the largest-ever level of investment in a single year in the history of Northern Ireland. That level of spend represents a real and meaningful achievement of the Executive in the most difficult of circumstances.

In conclusion, this should be viewed for what it is: a locally elected Executive and Assembly delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. I commend the February monitoring position to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

The conclusions that the Minister has drawn from the February monitoring round give us some comfort. I have acknowledged on previous occasions the proper focus that he has placed on performance and delivery, in particular on achieving the targets on underspend

this year. Consistent with previous comments, I would like to continue to develop that theme.

In last year's February monitoring round statement, forecast figures of departmental underspend in 2007-08 were £104 million in current expenditure and £49 million in capital expenditure. Subsequently, in June 2008, the provisional outturn figures showed a much greater level of underspend for the year of £177 million for current expenditure and £76 million for capital expenditure. What assurance can the Minister provide that the same pattern will not emerge for underspend in 2008-09, when we need to be maximising the use of available resource?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for his comments. Importantly, he again raises the issue of underspend at the end of the year. He will be aware of the fact — because he pointed it out — that I have laid a heavy emphasis, in the Assembly and in the Executive, on the need for the Executive, Departments and individual Ministers to be seen to deliver on the allocations in each of their budgets.

He raised the issue of what the difference may be between the levels of underspend in actuality compared with forecasts. As I indicated in my statement, forecasts this year have, I believe, been more realistic throughout the year. Forecasting is not an exact science. Nevertheless, looking at what has been projected for the year end, we have reason to believe that the position that we have struck is the right position. At all times, we try to ensure that at no point do we end up with an overspend on the block position — which would be completely out of the question as far as the Treasury is concerned — but that, at the same time, we do not end up with a large amount of money underspent at the end of the financial year.

That is always the balance that must be struck, and I think that we have struck the right kind of balance in what we have presented throughout the year and at this stage in particular. The fact of the matter is that the amount of money that is being delivered, particularly through capital investment this year, has increased significantly from last year and is certainly on target in respect of net expenditure.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for a very positive statement on the monitoring round. In the Minister's statement he referred to the agriculture sector. Obviously, in the recent past, the agriculture sector has had distinct problems. I declare an interest, but not as a pork retailer — which I suppose puts me in a position. However, I lost nothing as a result of the contaminated feeds incident before Christmas other than an increase in blood pressure and a receding hairline, although I do not think that I have any hairs left to go grey because they are all grey anyway.

That apart, one concern expressed to me about that incident was the effect that it had on the pig industry in particular. It was made known to me that a number of people with whom I do business lost a lot of money in the pork industry in the three weeks before Christmas. The Minister said that increased hardship payments will be made — and that is good news. How will that money be handed out to the many producers who had to dump the finished product as a result of the dioxin scare? In addition, pig farmers in Northern Ireland had a traumatic time, and I am keen to find out how it will be ensured that the moneys allocated will find their way to those farmers who suffered and lost out.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am sure that Mr Shannon's receding hairline and so on was not entirely down to the dioxin-contaminated feed incident. If so, there has been a rapid deterioration in his position.

On 15 January 2009, the Executive agreed to introduce a cull, collection and disposal scheme to deal with the removal of animals in restricted herds that cannot enter the food chain. It was agreed that the cost of slaughtering and rendering the animals will be met, and on 29 January, the Executive agreed a hardship scheme for producers and processors. The Member asked about the details of that scheme, which is a matter for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The overall figure is £9.6 million to cover hardship payments to producers and processors.

10.45 am

I am glad to say that the tendering process and a reduction in the number of animals restricted has led to a reduction of some £1.5 million in the cost of the slaughter and disposal of the animals. As I said, that money has been put in to help to increase the hardship payments. That is a positive announcement, which will provide greater help for processors and producers as well as our agriculture industry at this difficult time.

Mr McNarry: I am not sure that the Minister fully appreciates the appreciation that I have for his problems, especially after hearing his statement this morning. The overcommitment in the February monitoring round highlights the risk that the Minister is taking in pushing Departments to spend, while, at the same time, hoping that the final outcome of underspend will equalise the overcommitment.

Following on from the probable write-off of over £10 million spent on consultants for Workplace 2010 and the loss of £4 million due to the spend on consultants for the Maze stadium project, will the Minister look at the highly paid in-house experts available to all Departments and check whether it is really necessary to employ them, as well as getting into the extravagance of contracting out to consultants?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises a couple of points. As he knows, the issue of consultants has been raised by many Members, across all Departments. He mentioned two examples of the use of consultants, but he will also be aware of the considerable amounts of money being spent on consultants in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department for Social Development (DSD), the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and all the other Departments. We all want to see a reduction in the money spent on consultants. There is, of course, a role for consultants — even in local councils, there are certain points when the employment of outside consultants may be appropriate. However, we all want the spend on consultants to be looked at very carefully.

The Member knows that the figure that he quoted for the cost of consultants for Workplace 2010 is on the high side, but, in any case, a considerable amount of that money was not wasted because the work is still useful.

The Member made a general point about overcommitment and its risk. It is absolutely right that I, as Finance Minister, along with the Assembly and the Executive, ask Departments to deliver on the budgets that they have been given. That is the right approach, and I cannot understand how it is seen as a risk. Departments will always have reduced requirements; the Department for Employment and Learning, the Minister of which is the Member's party leader, has surrendered the greatest amount of reduced requirements this time. I do not see that as a criticism, although the Member described it as an inefficiency in a previous debate, a matter that I said he should take up with his party leader. However, it is sensible and prudent for Departments to surrender money that they cannot spend, so that it can be used for other purposes.

As the Member knows, when his party made its submission on the Budget, it urged the Executive to overcommit further — it said that the Executive were far too cautious in not making a greater level of overcommitment or budgeting for it. As I have indicated a number of times, Mr Beggs, who is in the Chamber today, said that if we extended the amount of overcommitment, we would be implementing one of the ideas suggested by the Ulster Unionist Party. Therefore, we are doing what the Member's party asked, so it is a bit late for him to criticise us.

Mr O'Loan: I recognise, and give credit for, the £1.5 billion capital spend for this year. Departments anticipate that some £18 million of current expenditure and £0.5 million of capital investment will remain unspent at the end of this year. Will the Minister explain why, as I understand to be the case, that was not formally declared for the February monitoring round?

The Minister stated:

“there is a bias toward prudent forecasts, with the actual level of underspend often substantially greater than that which has been forecasted previously.”

He also identified the:

“large margin of error inherent in the forecast information that was provided by Departments”.

From all I read, and from those two statements in particular, I do not get the impression of properly managed financial systems across the Departments, including the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). I wonder why high salaries and, in particular, large bonuses are paid to senior civil servants to carry out that job, as they do not appear to be doing it successfully.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member is being slightly unfair; if something goes wrong, one could say that the salaries paid to MLAs are out of kilter, and one may ask what the monitoring Committees are doing. However, I would not be so unfair, because everyone does their best in this process.

The Member raised issues that individual Assembly Committees will want to take up with their respective Departments and Ministers. There may be different reasons, such as planning and so forth, why certain projects have not come to full fruition by the end of the financial year. However, Departments are undertaking considerable delivery of projects. The big reduction in the scale of reduced requirements and the extremely low level of underspend that is forecast demonstrate that all Departments and Ministers are taking more seriously the need to spend, and deliver on, the money.

If the Member has issues about non-expenditure and about forecasting, those are matters for individual Ministers, whether in DSD, DRD or DEL. Committees and Members will wish to pursue those matters with each Minister and Department, because they, not DFP, manage the process. DFP monitors and observes the process; it hears the reports and tells Departments what they have to do, but it is for Ministers to deliver on such matters. I am sure that the Member will look closely at how all Departments have performed throughout the year.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his statement. The capital spend of £1.5 billion is a considerable sum. However, in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), the figure for this financial year is £1.8 billion. Will the Minister clarify the current status of ISNI, and, in particular, the figures contained in that document?

Will the Minister elaborate on how he foresees the additional moneys for winter fuel payments being delivered? I am not sure that the financial systems to facilitate those payments are in place. In practice, will the June monitoring round be the first opportunity to

address that issue? No winter payments have been issued so far, and June is in the summer.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The winter fuel allowance is a matter for the Department for Social Development. DFP has made the funds available and has undertaken to find the additional amount when it is needed. The delivery, processes and timing are entirely for the Department for Social Development, and, therefore, the Member should direct his question to the Minister concerned.

I am glad that the Member pointed out that considerable amounts of money are being spent through the investment strategy. He stated the gross figure, but that includes capital receipts. In the current climate, it would have been an act of madness to go ahead and sell off assets that would not have realised value for money. If value for money can be realised in some instances, it will be sensible to proceed, but DFP would have been rightly criticised for proceeding where that was not the case.

Whether to proceed with the sale of assets is a matter for individual Departments; there is no diktat from DFP. Each Department decided that in the current climate, it was unwise to proceed with the sale of certain capital assets because that would have short-changed the taxpayers and people of Northern Ireland. The money that would have come from the sale of assets is not now available to reinvest on capital spend. However, net expenditure this year is between £1.4 billion and £1.5 billion, which is an increase of well over 30% from this time last year, and more than double the amount available in 2003-04 under direct rule.

A massive amount of capital expenditure is going on across all Departments. That is helping our construction industry and laying the foundation for a better infrastructure for the people of Northern Ireland in housing, health, education, roads, and so on for the future.

The good news is that the expenditure that is going on this year is set to increase next year, and will increase again in the year following that. When people talk about the help to the construction industry, help in jobs, and help in improving our employment prospects, that considerable amount of capital investment should be remembered.

When we concentrate on the in-year monitoring process and the small amounts that are available for reallocation, we should bear in mind that £1.5 billion in capital alone is being invested this year. In Government procurement overall, there is over £2.2 billion, which is a massive amount of investment by anyone's standards.

Mr Hamilton: The Finance Committee has taken an understandable interest in the Department's ongoing review of the in-year monitoring process as a whole. With that in mind, does the Minister consider that the

level of reduced requirements is sufficiently high throughout the year?

In seeking to avoid the perceived problems with the housing budget, and to ensure that there is ongoing support for our construction industry, does the Minister agree that the collective approach adopted by the Executive to the recent dioxins incident, where all Departments made a contribution to tackling the problem, is a pragmatic and sensible approach to a difficult issue, and one worth examining?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee for his question. He raises the issue of the in-year monitoring process and how that works in practice. We are committed to working on that issue and seeing how that can be improved. We are working alongside the Committee in all of that.

He also raised the issue of what can be done if it is felt that money should be found for a particular project. He cited the example of housing, and is aware that we have already taken steps in-year, by providing £20 million of extra allocations and giving the Department for Social Development flexibility to move some £10 million into social housing.

He asked about the general principle, the way in which money was allocated to deal with the dioxins incident, and whether that would apply. It could do, if the decision of the Executive was that we should reorder Budget allocations. It could be done, but as I have said previously — and some Members do not wish to pursue this aspect too readily or in too much detail — it can only be done by removing money from other budgets.

When it came to the cull and the hardship payments resulting from the dioxin incident, a formula was agreed. Money had to be found, and a formula was applied. Each of the Departments, according to the formula, gave up money to allow those payments to happen, because a sufficient degree of priority was accorded to the response. If the Executive agree that that is what should be done in respect of another matter, clearly, a formula has been set out.

Let us not forget the underlying principle — if we want to put extra money above the money that is in the baseline, in the actual budgetary allocations under the comprehensive spending review and the allocations under the three-year Budget, that money has to be found from other Department's budgets.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and welcome his speech this morning. There are very serious problems with the rising levels of court actions for repossession of homes in England. I know that that concerns everyone. Will the Minister tell us whether, if resources become

available shortly, they could be directed towards helping those people who are losing their homes?

11.00 am

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We want to do everything possible to help people who are in difficult circumstances during this time of economic hardship. I shall come to specific points in a minute.

I hear people saying that at this difficult time, the Executive, the Assembly and the devolved legislature should not be doing some of the things that they are doing to help hard-pressed families, communities, vulnerable and elderly people, and so forth. I believe that one of our primary tasks is to help ordinary individuals, families and communities to get through this difficult time — and some of the measures that we have taken, such as free transport for the elderly and the introduction of fuel credits, are important.

The issue that the Member highlighted is another important area, which, depending on the level of resources that become available, I will bear in mind. Of course, it is primarily a matter for the Department responsible for overseeing that area; that Department has a budget and, if it so wishes, it could reprioritise and reallocate that budget.

However, with respect to the overall position, any recommendations that I bring to the Executive as Finance Minister must take account of all competing demands. Nevertheless, I am aware of, and I take seriously, as do my party and others, the importance of ensuring that people are helped through these difficult times as much as possible.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his statement, which referred to an additional £5 million for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Will the Minister explain how that money will benefit Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I said in my statement, the £5 million for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is the final instalment of the £20 million first call on available resources that was guaranteed to the Department in the 2007 Budget process. In order to manage the emerging pressures, those payments are spread out over each monitoring round.

The £5 million pounds will help in the following ways: £1 million is for improving access to elective care services; £1 million will go to cardio-vascular services; £2 million will be spent on appointing foster carers for children; and £1 million will be spent on improving long-term health provision and early-intervention services. Those measures will be widely welcomed in the community and in the Assembly.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, which shows that Northern Ireland will not be returning

funds to the Treasury. I hope that the money retained will be well spent.

The table at appendix A of the Minister's statement on the February monitoring round is unusual because many of the headings have zeros under them. Will the Minister explain why so many zeros are appearing under those headings? I understand that sums below £100,000 are not normally included in monitoring rounds. Given that he has included figures below £100,000, would it not have been better to have included those which appear as zero also?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his comments and for his questions. I presume that he is referring to Annex A, the reduced requirements.

There are two issues. First, Departments' proposals to reallocate sums below a certain amount of money internally can be brought to the Executive and agreed without necessarily appearing in tables such as that one.

Secondly, these are reduced requirements that Departments are giving up to the Executive for possible reallocation elsewhere. Therefore, those amounts have been surrendered, and in the interests of clarity and openness, they are published.

I am happy to write to the Member, setting out the technical details of how small amounts of money are handled.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement, particularly in relation to the fuel poverty financial assistance scheme. The Minister has already alluded to the logistics of payments from the scheme through DSD and deciding to include households in receipt of pension credit. Will the Minister give us some idea of the number of people involved, because, originally, 36,000 pensioners were not expected to qualify for a fuel poverty assistance payment? Subsequently, the Executive extended that. Will the Minister provide the House with the numbers of people involved?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It was suggested originally that people on income support would be entitled to the fuel poverty financial assistance scheme, but the Executive decided to extend that provision to pensioners who receive pension credit. They wanted to ensure that no pensioners who were in receipt of pension credit would be left out. The total number of people who are eligible for fuel poverty assistance is around 150,000, but the delivery of that scheme is a matter for DSD.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Finance Minister for his statement and for outlining the prompt and agile response to the dioxin-contaminated food incident. Furthermore, I welcome his allocation, since December, of £15 million to the fuel poverty financial assistance

scheme. Many of my constituents are feeling the practical benefit of that scheme, and I welcome that. Most people in Northern Ireland welcome the skilled moves that were put in place to deliver that effective reality for our constituents.

Will the Minister provide the House with more detail on the type of capital projects that will be implemented as a result of the remarkable package of £1.5 billion. Once that money is allocated and spent, it will be the single largest allocation of funding towards capital projects to have been made in the history of Northern Ireland. That should not go unmentioned in the House.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his comments on the dioxins issue and the fuel credit. They are important initiatives that are of benefit to his constituents and to many of our constituents across the Province. The Member is right also to refer to the investment that will be made through the capital expenditure programme. As I said previously, this year's planned investment will increase by 6% next year, and it will be more than 30% higher than that of last year.

Mr Paisley Jnr asked for examples of investments that will be made. It is important to highlight the type of projects that money is being spent on, and I have mentioned some of them already. One can see the improvements that have been made to the Westlink, and the work that is being done there, for instance. The Department for Regional Development invested money in that project, as it did on the Dungannon to Ballygawley road and at Newry.

In the Health Service, £113 million has been invested in critical-care development and £6.8 million in pharmaceuticals at the Royal Victoria Hospital. We invested £40 million in the Ulster Hospital redevelopment; £50 million in the Downe Hospital, which will be an enhanced local hospital; and investment was made at Altnagelvin Hospital as well.

Some £127 million has been invested in Northern Ireland Water for the Belfast sewers project, and the 10 waste-water treatment projects that are under construction will receive an aggregated value of £90 million.

There are a number of education projects under construction in DEL, which will total £83 million. They include the South Eastern Regional College projects, over five locations, which have a total value of £49 million; the South West College, with a value of £9 million; the Northern Regional College, with a value of £9 million; and the North West Regional College, with a value of £16 million. Furthermore, work valued at £120 million is ongoing in the Belfast Education and Library Board. Those are just a few examples of the planned capital expenditure.

By way of putting that expenditure into perspective, one should remember that the figure for 2003-04 was

£680 million, and in 2007-08, it was £1.126 billion. This year, we are looking at a figure close to £1.5 billion. That is good news and shows that devolution is delivering for the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

As he said, the February monitoring round is not usually the time for significant reallocations. However, is the Minister confident that the necessary scrutiny of Ministers and the adherence to good financial governance are occurring? The Minister mentioned the surrendering process, which is in keeping with good financial governance. The Minister for Social Development surrendered money and, subsequently, referred to it as a smash-and-grab raid by the Executive. In my capacity as a member of the Committee for Social Development, I ask the Finance Minister to comment on that.

More specifically, as a Member who wants to scrutinise the monitoring round, I am concerned that I still find it difficult to do so. Does DFP intend to make that process easier for us all?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In response to a question from the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel about the monitoring process, I have already indicated that I am happy to consider that process; we will work on that issue.

There is no doubt that the in-year monitoring process is an effective way to manage budgets of this scale; the same process is used elsewhere. The alternative would be simply to take a slice off every budget, put those moneys into a fund and wait to see what needs emerge. However, we could end up with vast amounts of money sitting in a fund doing nothing all year and then have a mad dash towards the end of the year to spend it. That would be a completely daft approach to public expenditure. The process is designed to ensure that the maximum amount of money is being spent in-year on the programmes and projects that have been set out in departmental plans.

We debated the DSD issue earlier, and the Minister for Social Development is keen to draw a line under all that, because the situation moved on pretty rapidly when the facts of life were spelt out. I am always keen to facilitate Ministers as much as possible when they bring forward bids. At the time that the social housing budget was reviewed, the emphasis was on fuel poverty. DSD was demanding money for that area, and accommodation was made for it.

That was done, so to then be accused of not doing what DSD wanted has left many colleagues perplexed and concerned, given that the matter had been agreed unanimously by the Assembly, including the Minister for Social Development. As we move forward, we want to recognise that the social housing budget is extremely important. I am committed to ensuring that

we deliver on the housing targets — including newbuild maintenance, among other issues — over the period of the Programme for Government. We will continue to work alongside DSD to achieve that.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. As we move forward with monitoring and the broader budgetary process over the next few years, the national economic picture will be vital. Therefore, will the Minister outline any further information that he has after his discussions with the Prime Minister about efficiency savings?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Member for his question, which flags up an important issue. I have already had discussions with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts, and I will have further discussions next week with those Scottish and Welsh Ministers, as well as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, on that and other matters. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have also had discussions with the Prime Minister on efficiency savings because according to the Chancellor's pre-Budget report, so-called efficiencies are not coming back to Northern Ireland in 2010-11, and that is a serious concern.

At the time of the financial settlement and the comprehensive spending review, it was agreed that all efficiencies that were made in Northern Ireland would be retained in Northern Ireland, and we intend to hold the Government to that commitment. All parties in the Assembly need to adopt a united approach to the matter. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that one party in the Executive is now agreeing to press ahead with not only those efficiency cuts but greater cuts.

I refer to the — what is it, “Conservative Ulster”? I refer to the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists - New Force, which includes Owen Paterson, the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and is on record as saying in its policy document that it wants to see greater so-called efficiencies introduced from April 2009. It is important that the Assembly says that that is not what the people of Northern Ireland want, and it is not what the Assembly and the Executive believe to be the position. That must be made clear to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. Unfortunately, they may use that against us in our negotiations.

11.15 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank him for his commitment to support the extension of the fuel poverty payment scheme to households on certain benefits. Will the Minister clarify the position on the reallocation of approximately £10 million from the Department for Social Development urban regeneration programme to support the Housing Executive's maintenance and

improvement scheme? Is that money safe or has it been surrendered?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Member for his comments on winter fuel payments. The proposal to reallocate £10 million came from DSD, and I was happy to accede to the request to move money from urban regeneration into the housing budget. As I understand it, that money has been allocated and is, therefore, safe for expenditure on the programmes that the Member mentioned. The fact that that could be done shows that sometimes Departments can, from the considerable budgets that have been allocated to them, take action to deal with some of the pressures that emerge — and that is just one example.

The money that comes in an in-year monitoring round — which could be £50 million or £100 million — is small beer compared to the £4 billion in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the £2 billion in the Department of Education. All Departments have vastly more money at ministerial disposal than the DFP Minister and the Executive have at any in-year monitoring round.

It is important to point out that the initiative taken by the Minister for Social Development shows that if Ministers face a pressure, they can say that that pressure is more important than something else and that they could use their considerable budget — money that may not be spent — for other things rather than asking me for money from another Department. Therefore, that initiative was a good example of what can be done. It shows that Committees should be pressing Ministers. Instead of Committees saying that they need more money, they should be asking Ministers how they are using their budgets now and what they could be doing better with their money now, and ask them why are they are asking other Departments for help. Is there not something that Ministers could be doing, given the considerable resources at their disposal?

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Provisions Bill

Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill (NIA 6/08) be agreed.

This short Bill deals with routine financial matters that do not affect the overall quantum of Government expenditure in Northern Ireland. It is the first Financial Provisions Bill taken by the Assembly, but is the latest in a series of financial provisions Orders. The last such measure, the Financial Provisions (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, was taken forward during direct rule and came into effect on 1 April 2005.

Such a Bill is normally required every two to three years to deal with routine financial measures, including any minor and/or non-controversial amendments to governing legislation. This Bill contains five miscellaneous provisions requiring primary legislation.

The first of the financial matters in the Bill relates to the absolute privilege for reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland. At the time of original devolution, there were deficiencies in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and a gap in the Scottish devolution legislation in that absolute privilege for the purposes of the law of defamation did not apply to publication of the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports. The Comptroller and Auditor General's view is that auditors should have uniform powers throughout the United Kingdom when they are reporting on the use of United Kingdom taxpayers' money.

On 27 November 2007, the Assembly passed a motion that provided absolute privilege for the purposes of the laws of defamation on reports prepared under article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland Order) 1987 by the Comptroller and Auditor General and published by the Assembly through engaging section 50 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That motion addressed an immediate operational need and it applies to the mandate of only the current Assembly. The purpose of the provision today is to enter that measure into statute, thus avoiding successive Assemblies having to vote on it. It also ensures that the arrangements for audit and accountability under the Assembly are at least as robust as those that existed under direct rule, and are similar to those in other jurisdictions. Therefore, the Bill represents an early opportunity to address through legislation the extension of privilege to all reports prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Clause 2 of the Bill gives authority to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to incur

expenditure for activities that the Department considers benefit consumers in Northern Ireland. Support may be provided in whatever way the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment thinks fit, including through grants or loans, and on such terms as it thinks fit —whether repayment or otherwise. That would include, for example, expenditure in the management of consumer debt.

Currently, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment lacks the specific authority to pay for the provision of debt advice. Instead, in order to make the payments, it relies on statutory powers granted to the Department for Social Development through the Social Need (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The provision of a high-quality debt-advice service that is free of charge to the user is an important contribution to the anti-poverty strategy, and will be of particular relevance during the current credit crunch and generally difficult economic climate. DETI's debt-advice service has the funding that it needs to continue for a further three years from 1 April 2008.

In view of the increasing need for consumer debt advice and funding, it is important that expenditure on such advice is put on a proper and firm statutory footing, rather than relying on powers granted to the Department for Social Development (DSD). The current arrangement is not considered appropriate for ongoing expenditure, and DETI wants to put such funding on an appropriate, firm and statutory footing.

Clause 3 of the Bill empowers DETI to incur expenditure for any purpose that the Department considers will benefit the development of Northern Ireland's social economy sector. Members are aware that a social economy enterprise is a body whose activities are:

“(a) conducted as a business; but

(b) are so conducted primarily for social, environmental or ethical purposes or for other purposes beneficial to the community, rather than for profit.”

Examples of social economy enterprises are credit unions, housing associations, co-operatives, community businesses and businesses whose profits are distributed for the benefit of communities and people in Northern Ireland. That provision in the Bill will give the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment — as the sponsoring Department with policy lead in that area — the legal authority to provide financial assistance to the Social Economy Network, as the representative body of the social economy sector.

The Department funds the Social Economy Network on an extra-statutory basis, through annual Budget legislation, but wishes to use the Bill in order to put that funding on a more appropriate, statutory, footing.

Clause 4 of the Bill authorises the issuing of money from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund to the

Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to cover the costs of collecting rates on behalf of district councils. At present, my Department is legally required to recover the cost of collecting the district rate, and to do so by deducting it from the amounts payable to district councils. Historically, that income has been retained in the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and accounted for in the public income and expenditure account that is laid before the House prior to 30 September each year.

Therefore, my Department has not been able to recognise that income in order to offset the departmental expenditure incurred through collecting rates on behalf of district councils. The money is already included in the Department's budget, and the clause is entirely technical in nature in that it allows for the alignment of Estimates, budget and accounts.

The final clause in the Bill relates to the repeal of the requirement to prepare finance accounts. That is a statutory obligation under section 10(2) of the Exchequer and Financial Provisions Act (Northern Ireland) 1950, which required DFP to prepare and lay the finance accounts of Northern Ireland before the Northern Ireland Assembly, and which is now redundant. The structure of Government accounts has developed over many years and has inevitably resulted in duplication of information. The information that was previously contained only in those finance accounts is now available in the public income and expenditure account and in departmental accounts, so there is no loss of accountability. Separate finance accounts are no longer appropriate and they represent unnecessary administrative effort.

As Members are aware, the Bill provides for a number of routine and technical financial provisions. I commend it to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful to the Minister for his elaboration on, and explanation of, the general principles of the Bill. That will permit me to abbreviate my comments appropriately.

On 4 February 2009, the Committee for Finance and Personnel received a pre-introductory briefing from departmental officials about the background to the Bill and the approach that they took when they consulted with other Departments. The Committee recognises that the purpose of financial provisions legislation is to cover routine financial matters, such as minor amendments to governing legislation, or to regularise an existing practice. The Committee also understands that legislation is normally required at intervals of two or three years to adjust statutory limits and handle various non-controversial issues, and is regarded as a means of tidying up.

The Committee was advised by the Department that the Bill was technical and non-controversial in nature and did not, therefore, require a public consultation. The Department further explained that it had invited contributions to the Bill from other Departments in December 2007.

As a direct result, the Department identified a number of requirements for inclusion in the Bill. Those requirements included provision to confer absolute privilege to certain reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland; provision to enable the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to incur expenditure for consumer purposes and expenditure relating to social economy enterprises; provision to provide for the cost of district rates collection to be charged on and issued from the Consolidated Fund to the Department of Finance and Personnel; and provision to repeal the requirement on the Department of Finance and Personnel to prepare finance accounts.

Prior to the introductory briefing, the Committee was advised by the Department that the provisions of the Bill would be a matter of interest to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. As such, my Committee issued copies of the draft Bill to the respective Committees for scrutiny. Upon reply, no issues were raised by the other Committees in relation to the Bill.

At the briefing session on 4 February 2009, members raised a number of issues with the Department, including clarification on the account treatment of the issue of money from the Consolidated Fund to DFP in order to cover the costs of collecting rates on behalf of district councils, and clarification on whether the accounting treatment from the Consolidated Fund to DFP had any negative or positive impacts on district councils. The Committee also sought a detailed written explanation on the repeal of the requirement to prepare finance accounts. Those queries were dealt with very satisfactorily.

The Committee recognises that the Bill is, in general terms, technical in nature and does not appear to raise any substantial issues of concern at this stage. Members also acknowledged that the removal of the statutory requirement to produce financial accounts — which were identical to the public income and expenditure accounts in every respect — will avoid duplication and will provide for a more efficient approach by the Department in the preparation of Government accounts in the future.

Overall, the Committee was generally satisfied with the briefing and clarification provided by the Department. Members will engage with DFP officials and other stakeholders as part of its consultation exercise on the details of the provisions of the Bill during the Committee Stage. In the meantime, on behalf of the Finance

Committee, I support the principles of the Bill and I support the motion.

11.30 am

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton): I am grateful to the Minister for presenting the Bill to the House. For some time, the Audit Committee has been concerned about the issue of privilege for the reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Those reports occasionally deal with serious issues, such as fraud and impropriety.

Clause 1 of the Financial Provisions Bill has implications for the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports in respect of absolute privilege for the purposes of the law of defamation. The devolution settlement did not give absolute privilege to those reports. Previously, the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland had enjoyed the same absolute privilege as his counterpart in Westminster. During suspension, the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports were published in Westminster and were, therefore, privileged.

The Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) are persuaded that it is an anomaly that the reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland do not attract absolute privilege. To address that problem in the short term, on 27 November 2007 the Assembly agreed a motion — to which the Minister referred — whereby any report from the Comptroller and Auditor General that was prepared under article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 should be printed and published under the Assembly's authority. That gave protection to the contents of some of the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports.

To date, that measure has been the legislative cover under which the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports have been published. However, the resolution applies only to the current mandate and to reports prepared under article 8 of the 1987 Order. Today, I am glad to give my support, and that of the Audit Committee, to a more concrete provision to protect the rigour of the audit functions in this Administration.

Clause 1 of the proposed Financial Provisions Bill contains a remedy to that short-term situation by extending absolute privilege, for the purposes of the law of defamation, to all reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General that are authorised or required by any statutory provision. The clause is intended to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General is free to present to the Assembly all relevant evidence gathered during the course of his studies and audits without having to defend defamation actions. The provision is more wide-ranging than the one agreed in the Assembly's resolution of 2007 in that it includes reports authorised or requested by any statutory enactment, not just those prepared under the 1987

Order. That will bring the powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General into line with those available to his counterparts in Westminster and Wales.

The Committee believes that the provision is fundamental to the practice of public audit and that the Assembly's auditors should be able to present all significant and relevant findings to the Assembly without the threat of legal challenge from third parties who are involved in the issues covered in the report. The Audit Committee supports the provision.

Mr B McCrea: I realise that much of the Bill is technical in nature, so I do not propose to detain the Assembly unduly. I will take the opportunity to ask a number of questions, because I did not have the benefit of seeing the briefings that were given to Committees.

Mr Newton talked about absolute privilege for the purposes of the law of defamation. Presumably, defamation occurs only when people have been wrongly accused. Although I totally understand the need to ensure the timely delivery of reports and suchlike, I wonder what redress people have if they feel that they have been defamed. Perhaps the Minister will address that issue at some stage. A situation would arise only if — in ordinary circumstances and at a later date — court proceedings might take place.

Mr Weir: I will speak through the Chair; I do not want to be chastised like I was yesterday. I want to elucidate the matter for the Member. Defamation can occur when somebody is wrongly accused.

However, truth can be a defence against defamation. Therefore, one person can defame another person, but, if he or she is speaking the truth, that can be used as a defence, in the same way as absolute privilege can be used as a defence in defamation proceedings.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his helpful intervention. That was the point that I was trying to make. I think that I have got it right: defence against defamation can occur only if it is proven that the truth will out. Therefore, if one person said that a particular thing happened, but it was later shown that, in fact, that did not happen, in that person's defence, it could be said that the absolute truth was not apparent.

Given that we give absolute privilege to the Comptroller and Auditor General, what procedural methods are in place for people who feel that they have been defamed, or for people who have not had a chance to put their case forward? In this instance, it is unlikely to happen, but we will have to consider who oversees the overseers. Perhaps the Minister will address that issue.

With regard to the legal position, it is interesting that, in cases such as *Pepper v Hart*, the comments that the Bill's proponents make now will be party to our

subsequent discussions. I ask the Minister to take that into account when he responds.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Devolution is working: we are getting free legal advice from a lawyer.

Dr Farry: I am in the unique position of sitting on the Committee for Finance and Personnel and on the Audit Committee, so I have been at both ends. I support the Second Stage of the Bill. It is largely technical in nature, and, as much as some Members would wish to engage in debate on the issue, I fear that that will be extremely difficult. The Bill is, essentially, a tidying-up exercise, which happens every few years, and it is important that we treat it in that regard.

I have only two points to make. First, I support the extension of full and absolute privilege to the Comptroller and Auditor General. That happens elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland is in an anomalous position. Therefore, we are out of line on the issue rather than the rest of the UK.

Members are aware of the work of the Public Accounts Committee and of the number of important cases that have been highlighted. No doubt, other challenging reports will need to be addressed and brought to public attention in the months and years to come. It is important that the Comptroller and Auditor General has the freedom and confidence to tell us the awkward truths that we need to hear for the sake of the public's interest and that they are not overly inhibited through fear of the consequences of their actions.

It is also important that the Northern Ireland Audit Office is at arm's length from the Assembly. However, the Assembly has an Audit Committee that has a relationship with accountability. There is also financial accountability through the Assembly in the allocation of resources. Therefore, that relationship is fine, and it is balanced. It is right and appropriate, we should welcome it, and the extension is worthy.

Secondly, I want to address the social economy powers. In some respects, I am surprised that the issue has not yet been addressed through legislation. We are all conscious of the importance of the social economy, particularly in the context of an economic downturn when the emphasis may shift from foreign direct investment to more indigenous activities. In that context, the role of the social economy becomes more important, and, if the legislation can enable that to be developed further on a more sound and legal basis, that is to be welcomed. Is the Minister satisfied that those powers need to be clarified only in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)?

Thus far, much work on the social economy in Northern Ireland has been delivered under Peace II, with the involvement of other sponsoring Departments, including the Minister's own Department. Are we satisfied that there is full legal authority for the work

that has been done under Peace money up until now? I am aware of the legal toing and froing over some aspects of the absolute legal framework. Perhaps that matter could also be clarified.

Overall, the Assembly should accept that this is a routine piece of legislation. The Alliance Party is more than happy to see it go forward.

Mr Weir: Sometimes, Members debate legislation that is not very headline grabbing. I doubt whether this afternoon's 'Belfast Telegraph' will lead with the debate on financial provisions, and I do not expect it to be a hot topic on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' tomorrow morning. I suspect that the technical nature of this legislation is such that even the most technically-minded of anoraks — some of us in the Finance Committee are proud to wear that badge, and I see the Member who spoke previously nodding — would find it difficult to salivate too much over the details of the Bill.

Nevertheless, the debate has thrown up some surprises. Had someone told me this morning that the phrase "social economy" would be mentioned by a member of the Finance Committee, I would have thought that Jennifer McCann or Fra McCann might be favourites, rather than Stephen Farry. However, we have a debate in which social economy seems to be at the heart, and Jennifer McCann is not here, which is a sad loss to the debate.

I welcome the legislation. It falls into two parts. The more technical areas relate to the social economy and provisions for how collection of rates is dealt with within DFP. I echo Mr Farry's remarks in relation to social economy issues. I assume that legislative provisions are in place to cover other Departments, but it would be helpful were the Minister to clarify that. An issue has been raised, for example, regarding the legal powers of councils with respect to Peace money: that concern may be a red herring, but it would be helpful if clarification were given.

Another issue raised is that of absolute privilege for reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General. That is an important power. As indicated by the Member who spoke previously, it will bring our practice into line with the rest of the United Kingdom and will put the Comptroller and Auditor General on the same basis as Members of the Assembly, for whom absolute privilege is a defence against allegations of defamation. The nature of the Comptroller and Auditor General's work means that there is always the possibility that such allegations might be made. It is important that the Comptroller and Auditor General is free to bring all the facts into the public domain. Consequently, it is vital that Comptroller and Auditor General reports are covered by absolute privilege, otherwise, unwarranted protection may be given to people and we would be

unable to get to the heart of issues. I am not a member of the Audit Committee, but I welcome those provisions.

With such a high level of freedom of expression comes responsibility. However, the nature of the Comptroller and Auditor General's office is such that it is most unlikely that there will be any allegations without supporting evidence of the highest calibre. The Bill is designed to provide a safety net rather than a carte blanche for irresponsibility. It is well-grounded and has been designed to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has an appropriate level of freedom when making reports.

Consequently, I echo the remarks of the Finance Committee, the Audit Committee, and those Members who spoke previously, all of whom welcomed the Bill. I hope it passes.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Members who have taken part in this short debate. I welcome the remarks of the Chairperson of the Committee, and I thank the Committee for its deliberations. If the Bill is passed today, I give a commitment that my officials will continue to work with the Committee when the Bill is in its Committee Stage. As has been said, the Bill is a short but necessary piece of legislation.

11.45 am

Several Members raised a number of points. Mr McCrea, Mr Farry and Mr Weir talked about the Comptroller and Auditor General and his reports. It is worth bearing in mind that until devolution, his reports were published with the presumption of parliamentary privilege, which is a long-standing practice at Westminster. It is one of the principles of public audit that an auditor of a legislature, a Parliament, or an Assembly should be able to present all relevant evidence to that legislature without threat of legal proceedings. Absolute privilege for reports is intended to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General will be able and free to present to the Assembly, without having to defend an action for defamation, all relevant evidence that has been gathered during the course of his studies or audits.

An audit has to deal with issues such as fraud and impropriety, and it needs to report fully on such matters, even when the evidence that is available is not to the highest judicial standards. Without absolute privilege, there is the potential for third parties who are involved in report issues to take legal action that will impede or delay the Assembly's access to full knowledge of cases in which there will be a significant degree of public interest. That could be seen as inhibiting the Comptroller and Auditor General from reporting freely and frankly to the Assembly. Through an earlier decision, the Assembly has provided absolute privilege to the Comptroller and Auditor General already. Therefore,

the purpose of this provision is to put that into statute on a permanent basis.

Mr Farry also raised the issue of the social economy.

Mr B McCrea: Before the Minister moves on to the next point, I want to say that I agree with and understand the need for the Comptroller and Auditor General to have absolute privilege so that he can bring information to the Assembly. However, there will be occasions when people feel that they have not had a chance to put their side of the story, for example. Normally, they would have redress to go to the courts. However, that will no longer be the case. I think that at the moment, people cannot even approach the PAC or the Audit Committee. Therefore, in the unlikely event that people have been misinterpreted, is there anything that we should be considering?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand where the Member is coming from. However, the process and approach of absolute privilege, which is being put into permanent statutory form, is not new. It is long-standing in most Parliaments and legislatures everywhere. Therefore, the Member's point is not new either. Obviously, individuals and companies, or whoever may be affected, will be concerned, but as Mr Weir said, normally reports are undertaken with the utmost seriousness and propriety. I think that there are procedures open to anyone, or any body, that is affected by the reports. The Member will know through his own research how that matter is dealt with elsewhere and how it has been dealt with here previously.

Mr O'Loan: I did not speak earlier because I was broadly comfortable with the different proposals in the Bill, which we will see in more detail when it reaches Committee Stage. However, in the light of what the Minister has just said, I want to ask him a question. Obviously, the Comptroller and Auditor General will use the protection that is given to him with due seriousness. The Minister said that the Comptroller and Auditor General might include matters in his reports on the basis of evidence and information that he has but that might not stand the ultimate test of judicial proceedings. That is what I understood the Minister to have meant. If that were the case and if such information were published, what would be the position for someone who reports on, or copies, that report? Would they have the same protection, and if so, is that covered by the legislation?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Those are matters of detail, which will be explored when the clauses are examined by the Committee. I am talking about the broad principle of whether it is right that there should be an absolute privilege. That has already been agreed, and the Bill will simply put that into statute. The Member raised a fair point, and it can be legitimately teased out in detail at Committee Stage. I

would be interested in coming back to that point at that stage. Today, there is wide agreement on the general principle, and matters can be teased out and considered in detail at the Committee Stage.

Mr Farry raised a point about the social economy. He mentioned the fact that DETI says that it has no specific legal authority, and the Bill will grant that. He asked about the position in other Departments. The provisions have arisen as a result of asking Departments what issues they thought needed to be put into the Financial Provisions Bill. I have not received any indication from any Department of any requirement to take similar action. I will confirm that in full to the Member and to the House, but my understanding is that there is no need to take any further legislative action.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 6/08] be agreed.

Budget Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Budget Bill [NIA 5/08] do now pass.

Here we go again. This is the third item on the agenda this morning. As we reach the Final Stage of the Budget Bill and on the heels of my statement to the House on the final monitoring round of the current financial year, I do not need to remind the House of the context of the global economic downturn in which the Bill has been presented. I do not want to take up much of the House's time, because many of the issues have been rehearsed already as the Bill has gone through its various Stages.

The overall unemployment level in Northern Ireland remains low, relative to the other parts of the United Kingdom, but that is of little consequence to those who have lost their jobs or who face that prospect. Members' contributions during the Supply resolution debate and the Second Stage of the Budget Bill served to illustrate the importance that the Assembly places on that vital strand of the devolved arrangements, particularly at this time.

I reiterate that the Executive had wisely placed growing a dynamic and innovative economy as their top priority in the Programme for Government. We have been able to make further announcements — particularly in relation to the December monitoring round — about delivery and about what we are already pledged to deliver. We have announced an extra £70 million of measures to assist low-income households and local industry. As we move forward into the next financial year, we will continue to build on the ongoing work to deliver practical support for the business community and for low-income households, including the most vulnerable people in society.

We have mentioned the net capital investment, with its consequential benefits for the local construction industry. It is set to reach an all-time high of almost £1.5 billion in the first year of the 10-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland. That is clear evidence of delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. Despite the difficulties of 2008-09, my earlier statement and the Budget Bill — which is technical in that it provides the legislative cover and authority to move the money on foot of the Budget — prove that the Budget has been managed prudently for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland and local businesses.

Of course, we would like to have additional money from the block grant and elsewhere to do more, but, as several Members have said, the important thing is to ensure that there is delivery. We must ensure that the

allocation of resources is properly targeted at the most urgent and economically beneficial priorities for the local business sector and for families.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Aire agus a LeasCheann Comhairle. . The Budget Bill provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2008-09. It takes account of the outcomes of the year's monitoring rounds and includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year until the Assembly votes on the Main Estimates for 2009-2010 in early June 2009.

The House will also be aware that the Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended accelerated passage for the Budget Bill following evidence from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) on 4 February 2009. That evidence session represented the culmination of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of in-year monitoring rounds in 2008-09, both in respect of the Department of Finance and Personnel as a Department and as regards public expenditure at strategic and cross-departmental level.

In October 2008, the Committee made a submission to the Executive's review of the Budget; it will be briefed on the Executive's response in early April 2009. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into scrutiny of the Executive's Budget and expenditure, which will run in tandem with the Executive's review. When the future Budget process is in place, the Committee plans to review the resources that are available to assist Statutory Committees — and Members in general — to undertake budgetary and financial scrutiny. That was mentioned earlier. The Committee will suggest practical arrangements or recommendations to enhance the Assembly's capacity in that regard.

The Committee also intends to review the processes for in-year monitoring of departmental expenditure by the Assembly and its Statutory Committees with a view to making recommendations to improve further the operation of processes and to facilitate more effective scrutiny. DFP officials are conducting their own review of the in-year monitoring process, and the Committee will want to examine the outcomes of that review as part of its inquiry. DFP's review is due to be completed by the end of March 2009; it would be useful if that were completed in time to enable the Committee to take forward its inquiry.

Those matters are for the future. On the Committee's behalf, I support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: As the Minister said, the Assembly has covered quite a number of issues already, and has covered the current one previously. I want to make some points by way of a summary of the Budget.

My party has argued the need for a revised Budget to counteract the economic downturn. It believes that it

has gained support from DFP officials — who, I presume, reflect the Minister's view to a certain degree — for the idea that some programmes may have run their course and that there is a need to reprioritise.

I was struck by the fact that when Wrightbus issued its unfortunate statement about 235 redundancies last week, it asked the Assembly to address certain issues; one was research and development and another was apprenticeship programmes. When such a request is made in the context of such a statement, the Assembly must take it seriously and recognise that the company speaks for the entire industrial sector.

The United States has responded to the economic crisis with a massive stimulus package. Several countries have created specific measures to upskill and train workers and to keep people in jobs so that they are ready when the upturn happens. Little of that has been seen in Northern Ireland. There has been no new Budget.

There is an ongoing review of economic policy in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), with specific reference to Invest Northern Ireland (INI). I have quoted John Simpson before, and shall do so again. During the week, he said that not enough ideas and new thinking are emanating from the board of Invest Northern Ireland and that the measures by which it measures itself are not impact-related.

It seems that the Finance Department has virtually abandoned the process of creating a regional economic strategy and says that it is now focused on dealing on the downturn; although it is not really. The Assembly will miss a significant opportunity to look to the longer term to provide for the upturn.

For the record, I will mention the significant pressures on the Budget, which include the loss of revenue from the decision to defer water charges, and the Civil Service equal-pay issue. There is also the £5 billion of efficiencies.

The Chancellor is threatening to make those real cuts. Given the level of Government receipts that were reported in January, we will be fortunate if there is no significant pressure to further increase that £5 billion. We know about the problem with capital assets realisation, and we know the consequence of the abandonment of Workplace 2010. The Civil Service estate is still not fit for purpose, and a significant amount of money needs to be spent on that.

12.00 noon

I want to refer to an issue that has not been addressed. I have always thought that the Assembly faces two major challenges, the first of which is the economy, and the second is reform of the public sector. We are losing track of that matter, and the Assembly's eye is not adequately focused on it. Much of the language that has been used on the efficiency savings is not the

right language. The language of people in various agencies and Departments, and of the Ministers, suggests that they are being forced to make the savings. Implicit in that is the suggestion that if they were not forced to make those efficiency savings, they would not take that approach. Achieving public-sector reform is not merely about implementing those efficiency savings; much more fundamental reform is required.

I am disappointed in what we are getting — or not getting — from the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU), which was an interesting initiative. For example, PEDU has conducted a light-touch review of Land and Property Services (LPS), in which there are major issues on arrears and problems with the penny product. LPS is only now addressing the issue of vacant buildings, and revenue has been uncollected for many years, yet PEDU used only a light touch with not a great number of outcomes. Reform of the public sector has not been adequately addressed and remains one of our greatest challenges. Given that the Budget is as it is, I urge the Minister to use the opportunities that arise throughout the year during the implementation of the Budget to address economic challenges.

I welcome his statement on the recent BBC ‘Spotlight’ programme about unemployment, when he said that the construction industry, which has particular problems, should receive significant priority when money becomes available — I think that he said that that industry should be the first priority. It is an Executive commitment to deliver on that, particularly in relation to housing. I welcome the Minister’s indications that he accepts that the matter is a shared Executive responsibility, and he has given a personal commitment to address it.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party supports the Final Stage of the Budget Bill and welcomes its passage, for no other reason than it ratifies the changes to the monitoring rounds during the financial year and enables all Departments to spend money from 1 April, rather than face a situation without money, or a Newt Gingrich-type situation whereby Government have to shut down because of a lack of funds.

I am grateful to the Ulster Unionist Party — or the Conservatives — for abandoning their notion to oppose the Budget. That was not a responsible approach, even from my position as a member of the opposition. It is important that the Assembly does not take the Alliance Party’s support for the passage of the Budget as support for the wider financial decisions that underpin the Budget. Like Mr O’Loan, I have major concerns about how the Assembly and the Executive are responding to the economic downturn. We have not taken sufficiently robust decisions and could have done more.

In order to highlight that assertion, I will refer to a number of issues. I note and accept that the Assembly will

spend a record and unprecedented sum — approximately £1.5 billion — on capital projects this year.

However, it is worth stressing that the Budget for this financial year referred to a net expenditure on capital of £1.4 billion, but in gross terms, the investment strategy referred to £1.8 billion. Therefore, there is, potentially, a £300 million shortfall in that respect.

I note that the Minister has said that the reason that we cannot do that is due to the capital receipts not coming through. Obviously, we understand why that has been the case because of the economic downturn. However, the disappointment that I have — and I know that it is shared by society overall, particularly by the business sector — is that the Executive do not have the flexibility and ability to respond by reallocating resources to close that shortfall in capital funds. We are not able to bring new resources to bear to deliver that £1.8 billion in capital investment.

If one looks at jurisdictions elsewhere in these islands and around the world, one can see an effort to accelerate capital spending in recognition of the fact that that we are in an economic downturn. In some respects, that is an easy way to get economic activity under way, but it also allows us to invest in a better infrastructure for society, which means that we are better placed to take advantage of a recovery when it comes.

Therefore, there is some sense of disappointment that we are not able to respond with greater flexibility to the situation in which we find ourselves. I say that while recognising on the one hand that we are talking about a record amount of money, but we have not delivered on the goals that were set out in those documents. I do wonder what the formal status of the investment strategy is, given that the numbers in that strategy are now significantly off course.

The £15 million set aside for winter fuel payments is an aspect of the spring Supplementary Estimates. I certainly support those payments being made — something had to be done for vulnerable pensioners during this winter. In a sense, the Executive found themselves in a situation whereby they could do little else, given that they had not undertaken other programmes with perhaps a slightly longer lead in. We are now in March, and moneys have not been paid. I am not sure why Ian Paisley Jnr was welcoming that money and how it has been making an impact on the pensioners in North Antrim. Perhaps something has happened there that has not happened elsewhere.

However, there is concern about why those payments have not yet been made. I appreciate that the Minister will say that it is the responsibility of the Minister for Social Development to deliver, but I think that that is a little bit silo-orientated. There is an overall responsibility on the Executive to address that. My wider concern is that the Executive have announced the extension of the

winter fuel payments to cover additional categories, and the Minister has been taking credit and praise for that today. That will, I understand, potentially involve spending an extra £7.5 million.

My concern is that the headroom that has been built in by the Department covered only the £15 million. The Minister suggested this morning that the additional £7.5 million needs to be found by the Minister for Social Development. Presumably that means finding it from elsewhere in the budget, and potentially surrendering it. The Minister is shaking his head, but I am happy to be corrected if I am wrong, and to receive a full explanation of where that £7.5 million will be found from resources. As far as I am aware it has not been allocated with any of the financial commitments that have been made so far with regard to actual money as opposed to a declaration from the Executive. Potentially, that issue may not be addressed until the June monitoring round, and if we are talking about sorting it out in June, that makes a farce of winter fuel payments.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that living in a divided society, we are skewing our resources to manage division. At most times, in a normal situation, that would bring major opportunity costs, which deny us the ability to invest in quality public services or elsewhere in the economy. In an economic downturn, when there is a need for enhanced flexibility to reallocate resources, that puts additional requirements on budgets.

The cost of managing a divided society is, therefore, brought into even clearer focus. My party is happy to share its ideas with the Minister, but it is worth noting that the Deloitte report that highlighted the cost of division in society — ‘Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide’ — has, effectively, been sidelined by the Executive. I encourage the Executive to return to that report, because we must consider all the available options for finding savings in society in order to reinvest money for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Those remarks aside, I am happy to support the passing of the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. Many of the issues that Members have highlighted during this debate will form the basis of a much fuller debate on the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which should take place later in the spring.

Mr F McCann: A LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde, ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo.

I support the passing of the Budget Bill. As I said during the Second Stage debate on 17 February, it is essential that the Assembly stand united in support of it. As we all know, these are very difficult times, not only in our society but throughout the island, and, indeed, all over the world. No one can argue against that. We can snipe at, and condemn elements of, the

Bill, but in the absence of any new thinking or any new suggestions on how we might move forward, that becomes nothing more than empty rhetoric.

I have said that there are many things that I wanted to see included in the Budget, and I argued in the House that we had to ensure that everyone felt ownership of the Budget and the Programme for Government. Unless we include all sections of our communities, especially those in need, we will fail. Nevertheless, the Executive have had to make hard decisions in order to ensure that the available resources are spread across all Departments.

The Committee for Social Development supported the Minister’s call for additional funding for the housing budget, and I make that call again today. That call has been heard, given the Executive’s record over the past 18 months, with tens of millions of pounds in additional moneys being given over the monitoring rounds to increase the housing budget. However, I have serious difficulties with how much of that allocation was spent on building new social housing.

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No, thanks.

I also have difficulties with many of the Minister for Social Development’s decisions, not least her inability to deliver a housing programme without blaming someone else. Yesterday in the Chamber, we discussed the publication of the findings of the inquiry into the Department’s handling of the neighbourhood-renewal strategy, which is its main instrument for dealing with deprivation. However, the Minister has failed to address seriously the problems in delivering the strategy.

In the December monitoring round, the Minister gave back £5 million that was to be used for neighbourhood renewal — so much for dealing with social deprivation. Yesterday at Question Time, I asked the Minister to tell the House how much of her overall budget had been spent on social newbuild, but she refused to answer the question. That is a clear mark of her time in ministerial office. She fails to face up to her responsibilities of office, in the hope that it will all go away, but it will not. In answer to every question that was put to her yesterday, someone else was to blame for her problems. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The debate is on the Budget Bill. It is not to be a résumé of what the Member feels about the Minister for Social Development. Please return to the motion.

Mr F McCann: My points, Mr Deputy Speaker, are directly related to the way in which the Department for Social Development has handled its budget, so they are relevant to the debate. Much of today’s debate, not to mention yesterday’s debate on neighbourhood renewal, concentrated on the Minister for Social Development’s arguing that everyone else was to blame for her

budgetary problems. The point that I make is that if she handled her budget properly, not as many difficulties would materialise.

I am surprised, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you say that I cannot raise that issue. Many Members, on all sides of the House, have raised difficulties and problems. The points that I make are directly relevant to the Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Member to remain focused on the Budget Bill.

Mr F McCann: I say again that the issues that I have raised are relevant to the Budget Bill. As other Members have said, one cannot argue in debate that there are difficulties with the Budget, and with the Ministers who handle those budgets, and then say that we cannot raise the difficulties that we see with the Budget.

12.15 pm

The Minister for Social Development says constantly that social housing will cure the ills of the construction industry. However, between 93% and 95% of the homes built have been for the private market, and it is the collapse of that market that has had a serious impact on the construction industry.

The Executive did not ask the Minister to redirect £90 million from the Social Security Agency in the monitoring rounds — and just think about how many construction workers she could have put to work if she had gone ahead with the planned newbuild for the agency. The issues are all budget-related. She has yet to say how much money she has spent from last year's budget on getting construction workers into jobs and on buying houses. Looking at this year's programme, it seems that many houses will be bought rather than being newbuilds. Yesterday, the Minister spoke again about her mortgage relief scheme, and how she made a bid to the Executive to implement the scheme, which was refused.

The facts are that she announced that she was going to implement the scheme last February, and that she called for a consultation period in October 2008. However, she has yet to tell anyone what the scheme will consist of and how it will address the issue. Perhaps she will tell Members how many people have lost their homes during that period —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Basil McCrea wishes to raise a point of order.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I realise that you are well able to look after yourself in the Chair. However, you drew Members' attention to concentrating on the Budget, and there is — regardless of the rights or wrongs of your decision — an indication that the Member should concentrate on the Budget and not on sustained attacks on the Minister. Although you may not want to deal with the issue at this stage, my question is not about the substance but the direction from you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. I reminded the Member to focus on the Budget Bill, and I again remind him to do so.

Mr F McCann: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I am coming to the end anyway. It is a bit rich of the Member to raise that point, because he goes off the subject constantly.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No, because I am almost finished.

We need to get on with the business of providing leadership; we need to support the Budget and the Programme for Government and we need to ensure that we do so without any unnecessary delay. A LeasCheann Comhairle, I support the Bill.

Mr B McCrea: I shall attempt to keep to the topic and to resist the temptation to spend 15 minutes discussing the Minister for Social Development. In all seriousness, I have made my personal position clear: the economic situation facing the people of Northern Ireland and the wider economic world is so serious that it requires people to start working together. I find it strange, therefore, that Members who normally lead-off with that statement, as the previous Member did, then decide, while they are on their feet, to have a go at another Member or Minister.

If we are serious about tackling issues, we must find a way forward. In a previous debate, I noticed that Members were discussing the big challenge that we face — namely that the block grant may be reduced; that we must ensure that Westminster does not decide to do that; and that all parties should join together to deal with that. Some Members also took the opportunity to take a sideswipe at the Ulster Unionists about their link with the Conservative Party. I speak as an elected member for the Ulster Unionist Party; however, the situation behoves all of us to use whatever —

A Member: — *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: Sorry?

A Member: Go ahead.

Mr B McCrea: The situation behoves all of us to use whatever influence we have to ensure that the finances are made available to the Assembly. In other debates, we have talked about the emergency powers that we need to tackle issues. I wonder whether the Minister will address the fact that as far as closures are concerned, shops in Lisburn, which is in my constituency, are dropping like flies. Although Lisburn offers the premier shopping experience in Northern Ireland by far, it certainly cannot —

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Ballymena.

Mr B McCrea: Ballymena may be a close second, but Lisburn is still number one.

I wonder whether the Minister has any way of helping to address the issue whereby rents have plummeted but rates have not. As I understand it, and unless the Minister can explain otherwise, we have no powers to help our retail friends.

Mr Hamilton: Is the Member aware of the passage, yesterday, of the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, which froze the non-domestic regional rate this year, and proposes to do so again next year? That will benefit businesses in Northern Ireland, including some of the retailers that the Member is talking about, to the tune of £8 million.

Is he also aware of the imminent introduction of legislation for a small-business rates relief scheme, which could assist some businesses, including the retail businesses that he is talking about, to the tune of 25% off their rates bills? I am sure that the Member will join me in welcoming those innovations and initiatives from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, which aim specifically to help some of the businesses that he is talking about today.

Mr B McCrea: I am always grateful to have the benefit of my friend's experience on rates. I have spent some time discussing the cap on industrial derating and other issues related to rates — I know the matter very well. I am bringing to the Assembly's attention the fact that although there are powers that we seek to take in the future — through the RPA and the small-business rates-relief scheme — the situation facing our economy is dire. There are businesses that will not qualify for the proposed rates-relief scheme because they are substantial retailers, and they are close to closing down.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is precisely for that reason that in the December monitoring round, we decided to freeze all rates for non-domestic properties, big and small, from April this year — people will not even have to wait until 2010 for the benefit. Therefore, we have dealt with the Member's points.

Mr B McCrea: I accept that the Minister is looking at those issues. However, although I might sound like the proverbial broken record, I wonder whether we need to look at making cuts. When I was talking about industrial derating, I argued that companies would either fail or go elsewhere if rates bills were not reduced. That was the argument that I made on manufacturing, and it was eventually taken on board. I see with my own eyes that businesses are failing now.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is a new proposal that has not been advanced until now. What services, which would otherwise be paid for through rates, is the Member proposing to cut?

Mr B McCrea: Minister, I have heard that argument before.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: What is the answer?

Mr B McCrea: Forgive me — I have heard that argument before; Minister Hanson put it to me when I argued for a cap on industrial rates. He said that the money from those rates had already been factored in, and he asked me where I would find the money to pay for a cap and what services I would cut. I answered that no rates whatsoever will be collected if there are no businesses.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is a cop out, and the Member knows it. His proposal is interesting, because I have not heard it from any other member of his party — if he is proposing cuts, it is worth exploring his comments. What cuts does he propose to make and in which Departments? If he does not answer that question, his proposition is not serious.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, I am prepared to answer that question, but —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please make all remarks through the Chair. This sounds like a conversation between Mr Basil McCrea and the Minister — will the Member include all of us?

Mr B McCrea: As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is my policy to try to take interventions, whenever possible, in order to argue a point. In that instance, I was responding to an intervention, but I will, of course, direct my attention to all other Members through you.

To save the Minister from having to get to his feet again, I will answer his question about where cuts in services can be made. The Assembly will have to consider making genuine efficiency savings, because the money that had been expected, whether from capital receipts or rates bills, is not forthcoming; companies are failing, and the retailers that have gone out of business no longer pay rates bills. The Assembly will have to make up the money that is now absent from the Budget from somewhere else. Where can the Assembly make cuts in order to find that money?

A large company in my constituency employs more than 500 people who are now on a four-day week and who have taken a 12.5% pay cut. When it comes to finding the extra money, the Assembly will have to examine seriously wage inflation in the public sector. We cannot expect simply to watch cuts being made in the voluntary sector and short-term working being introduced in the private sector without taking remedial action in the public sector. The Assembly must hold collective discussions on that issue.

I am not trying to put people on the dole — quite the opposite. However, we face a harsh financial reality, and having noted the considered manner in which the Minister dealt with matters in his statement, I am putting forward my view in a similarly considered

manner. If Members are serious about tackling financial issues, they must resist the opportunity to take petty party-political potshots and find a way to work together. Quite simply, the money to do everything that Members would like to do is not available, and, therefore, the Assembly must prioritise. When the UUP argued the need for a review of the Budget, I took on board the argument presented by the Minister and others. Their response was that a review would be too difficult, other means could be found and that Ministers had to take responsibility for finding savings in their Departments.

The Department that I know most intimately is the Department of Education, in which I can see that cuts are being made; inflation in the price of fuel, and the rising cost of maintenance and job evaluations are not being funded. When the Department makes bids that are described as inescapable, they cannot be met because there is no money available in the monitoring round.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No; I will give way in a minute.

That saving must come from somewhere. Cuts are being made, and it is mendacious for Members not to state openly where that is the case. We should be honest about that.

Dr Farry: I am almost tempted to suggest a merger as a possible approach. I welcome the Member's bravery in making certain points today.

The large school estate is inefficient, and many small schools with small catchment areas are under threat. A disproportionate amount of the education budget is spent on school buildings rather than on pupils' needs. There is a requirement for a sustainable schools policy, whereby the number of shared and integrated schools can be increased. Does the Member consider that the Minister of Education should accelerate such programmes to realise resources that could be reinvested in education or elsewhere in the economy?

Mr B McCrea: Part of what the Member said is lost on me; it is the same old, same old. He could not help starting off with a dig about mergers. When I was speaking, some Members remarked that I was being courageous. That reminds me of 'Yes Minister' and the courageous —

A Member: The very courageous —

Mr B McCrea: If Members who are speaking from a sedentary position wish to stand to make their points, I will give way.

Sometimes, Members must point out that the emperor has no clothes or highlight the challenges that we face. Anyone who walks around our towns and cities sees businesses that have closed down and must realise that that has a devastating effect not only on the owners of those retail concerns but on their employees. Those

closures also reduce the rateable take and will subsequently affect every person in the community.

12.30 pm

I am asking Members whether there is a way in which we can try to alleviate the immediate pressure that these folks are under — which is largely coming from rates — not at the end of the year, not when we get the small-business rates relief scheme, but now.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Member accept that a freeze on the regional rate for non-domestic properties this year and the proposal to do the same next year is, effectively, taking into account inflation, a real-terms cut over both periods?

I am interested in the Member's innovative proposal. I would support the notion of reducing rates both for domestic and non-domestic customers, but that is a decision and policy that would not come without consequence. I do not think that the Member has been as full and free in outlining those consequences as he should be.

Will the Member outline to the House why, in coming forward with this innovative and novel idea — and it is the first time that I have heard it being espoused by him or any member of his party — he has waited until today, until the Final Stage of the Budget Bill, and did not come forward with this innovative and novel idea yesterday when we were striking the non-domestic regional rate for the incoming year? I would have thought that that would have been a much more appropriate time to bring forward such a proposal.

Mr B McCrea: There are issues of merit in what the Member has said, but some parts of his speech were rather shallow. The reason that I am bringing forward these issues now is that when I met traders and commercial interests in Lisburn, as I did recently in relation to parking fees and such matters, it was explained to me that one particular person who had owned four shops in Lisburn, now owns two, and will shortly own one. Mr Hamilton will be aware of the travesty that that represents. In that one shop, five people were employed. Now, only one person is employed there.

As an elected representative, I listen to what people say and I look around and see that there is a very real problem. People have spoken to me about the level of rates that they are being asked to pay. People asked me whether there was something that they could do. I spoke to the rates office to ask when the latest revaluation was coming out, and asked whether that would give us any succour — would it help?

I am grateful for the Member's support, which is what I think he was indicating, to this innovative idea. All that I did was to ask the Minister whether there was any provision for us to have the powers to secure

targeted intervention. It comes down to this: some rates from some companies that stay open are better than no rates at all, which is where we are heading now. I see it with my own eyes, and I wonder whether there is anything that we can do about it. I will not detain —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I was just about to finish, but, yes.

Mr Hamilton: Maybe I should sit down, then, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In principle, I support the idea of keeping our rates as low as is possible, whether for domestic or non-domestic customers. I would support reductions if they were plausible. That would not come without consequence. The merit of the Member's proposal can be judged only if he were to outline — in explicit terms — exactly what the consequences of the cut that he proposes might be. He cannot simply stand up here and say that the non-domestic regional rate should be cut. The Member should have risen yesterday and made such a proposal when we were striking the non-domestic regional rate for next year. Why has the Member waited until today to suggest the idea?

I accept that the Member has genuine, valid concerns, as do I and other Members, and that is why I support the measures that the Minister is bringing forward this year and has proposed for next year, but the Member's proposal strikes me as a little bit desperate and last minute, and inappropriate in time. It should have been brought forward yesterday — that was exactly the appropriate moment in which to debate what the level of the non-domestic regional rate should have been.

Mr B McCrea: I entered this debate by asking whether the Minister has any powers to intervene selectively. Are we able to target a developing problem? Part of that debate led us to other places.

Given that I am responding to a question asked by Mr Hamilton, it would be good if he were listening to me.

The point that I am making is a logical consequence of the debate. Decisions cannot be taken by one person, or one party, because doing so would result in exactly what is happening in the Chamber now: Members are rubbing their hands in glee at the prospect of the headlines tomorrow. My message for every Member in the Chamber is that the people of Northern Ireland look to all of us on this hill in the expectation that we will help them out. Being able to do that comes down to having honest and frank discussions.

Earlier, in the debate on the Financial Provisions Bill, concerning the Comptroller and Auditor General, we spoke about the necessity of allowing people to come to speak their minds. I assure Members that I am not attempting to advantage any particular person; I am attempting to find a resolution to a dire problem

that is ruining commercial centres. Surely we must be able to do something about that situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you indicated that you wished to finish for lunch, and I have taken longer than expected. However, I must put my points firmly. Earlier, a Member, risibly, commended the Ulster Unionist Party for changing its mind about being in opposition. Party politics are not the issue for my party in this matter. We changed our position because having made our points about the Budget, we lost the argument and must, therefore, move on. If Members are serious about democracy and really want to work together on this matter, they must begin by confronting some of the elephants in the Chamber — that is a metaphor, and not a reference to any Member. We must deal with these matters constructively. It may well be that as the smirks to my left confirm, I am in a minority of one, but, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

“Even though you be in a minority of one, the truth is still the truth.”

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 next Member to speak will be Mr Attwood.

The sitting was suspended at 12.38 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Attwood: This has been a somewhat curious morning in respect of the debates on the monitoring returns and the Budget, because one or two things have, it seems to me, begun to crystallise around the issue of our Budget and about where it may or may not be going over the next two years and beyond.

The first is that the Minister referred this morning to the fact that, and I use his words, there will be an increase in capital expenditure:

“increasing next year, increasing the year after”.

That is a brave presumption, because, as the Minister also conceded this morning, conversations commenced last week with the Prime Minister, and will continue, as he indicated, in coming days and weeks, about what can be presumed when it comes to the 2009-2011 Budget.

I am mindful that a DFP spokesperson briefed that the London Exchequer may be looking for upwards of £200 million in cuts — or efficiency savings, or whatever new title they might be given. In the context of DFP briefing that there may be an additional pressure on the Budget of up to £200 million, and when there are, clearly, issues being discussed between our Government and the London Government, it seems presumptuous and daring of the Minister to inform the House that there will be an increase in capital expenditure next year and in the year after.

The second curious point that I want to raise with regard to what I have heard in the past few hours are words that the Minister himself used in reply to a question that was clearly planted and pre-ordained between himself and Simon Hamilton. In the context of the Budget and the February monitoring returns, the Minister, in reply to that question, referred to — and I again quote his words exactly — that it may be the case that:

“there would be a reordering of Budget allocations”.

“Reordering of Budget allocations” were the words used by the Minister in the Chamber this morning. He went further and said that it may be the case that:

“there may be removing money from other budgets”

— in order to address identified needs. Among the issues to which the Minister referred this morning were the dioxin contamination incident, housing and maybe other issues

It is curious that at a time when the SDLP and many people involved in economics in Northern Ireland are saying that there is a need to look at our Budget and consider whether adjustments should be made, the Minister is using the language “reorder Budget

allocations” and “remove money from other budgets” in order to address some specific need.

When responding to the debate, I hope that the Minister will take time to explain what those words mean, because one interpretation — which is the benign interpretation and to which I am not yet driven to conclude — is that the Minister is moving to the ground of the SDLP argument, which is that there needs to be a reconsideration or a review of Budget allocations and that there may be a need to reorder Budget allocations and to adjust its priorities.

If that is the ground that the Minister is now moving on to, I welcome him to SDLP ground, and I welcome his response to the argument that the SDLP has been outlining for a long period. Given that those are the Minister’s new words and that we have been hearing them over the past number of hours, it would be helpful if he were to now throw more light on what he means when he talks about reordering Budget allocations and removing money from other budgets. If he is prepared to say that that is what happened in the situation with dioxins, I invite him to indicate what other Budget priorities he thinks the same might happen with.

As I understand from the comments of Mr McCann from West Belfast, there was a curious exchange this morning. I apologise that I was not in the Chamber for all of the debate, due to —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Or, indeed, for hardly any of the debate.

[Interruption] There is good reason for that, as I am sure that you will accept, because as we speak, evidence is being taken in the Senate Chamber about the budgetary concerns and issues with the devolution of justice and policing. Given that you are currently negotiating —

Mr Attwood: Given that the Minister is currently in negotiations with the Exchequer in London about what the Budget allocation will be in the event of the devolution of justice and policing, was it not curious that Mr Robinson made an intervention during Mr Dodds’s speech on the Floor of the House of Commons last Wednesday when the procedural motion about the legislation that will be discussed in the House of Commons over the next two days was being debated? I see that Mr Dodds is nodding approvingly. Mr Robinson made an intervention while the Member for North Belfast was making a speech, putting on record for all to hear — not least his senior partners in Government — that:

“no end date has been agreed for the devolution of policing and justice”.

Mr Robinson took time out on the Floor of the House of Commons, in public, to drive the point home and to put on the record that there is no end date for the devolution of justice and policing. If that is not

sending a message to your partners in Government, I do not know what is.

However, let me come back to the debate —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Thank you, Alex.

Mr Attwood: There will be a lot more for the Minister to reply to before I am finished.

It was curious this morning that in another choreographed move, Mr Simpson and the Whip for Sinn Féin — Carál “get used to it” Ní Chuilín — asked about the SDLP’s approach in Government to budgetary issues, including the budget for social housing. It was curious because what neither Mr Simpson, nor Ms Ní Chuilín nor the Minister said about the Minister for Social Development’s input into the Budget negotiations was that, in November, she — nearly alone among her ministerial colleagues — made proposals to the Executive as to how the Budget could be distributed in order to respond to the economic downturn. That was in response to a specific question that was asked by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). At that moment, the DUP and Sinn Féin in Government did not respond to the Department for Social Development (DSD) Minister’s proposal about how the Budget should be spent in order that the economic downturn could be addressed.

Were that not bad enough, when the Minister said in December that he was returning moneys to DFP and looking for approval to spend those moneys on budgetary matters to deal with the economic downturn, what did Sinn Féin and DUP in Government do? They dismissed the Minister for Social Development’s paper and ignored her advice about using the Budget in order to maximise return in an economic downturn by assisting our construction industry. I welcome the fact that although the Minister of Finance and Personnel did not agree to that approach in December, come January, his position had changed somewhat and, as he outlined this morning in his reply to Mr Simpson’s question, he agreed that money that was in the DSD budget could be reallocated for housing.

An argument that the Minister would not accept in December because of the weight of evidence and public disquiet, he agreed to in January. I welcome that, and I trust that that will now work itself through in the terms in which the Minister spoke this morning. If there is going to be a reordering of Budget allocations, the principles that the Minister established in January, in agreeing that the reallocation of money should go back to DSD for housing, and in the letter that he sent to the Minister for Social Development, in which he said that he accepted that there was a materially disproportionate impact on the construction industry through housing stress and unmet housing

need, should be put into practice. I welcome the fact that the Minister also said those things publicly on the Floor of the House. I hope that the Minister, if he fulfils the words that he used this morning in respect of reordering budget allocations, will ensure that that works itself through in respect of the housing budget, the other priorities of Government expenditure, and need in our society.

It seems that the sands are shifting, and that the sands may even be shifting in DFP when it comes to how the Budget should be spent — and I am sure that the Minister will want to deal with that in his reply. However, it is not just the SDLP that is saying that; it may not just be the Minister who is hinting at that; it is also the view of the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey. Last week, he came before the Committee for Employment and Learning and made the following observation — this is the note of the recording taken by Committee staff:

“The question is, to what extent do you revisit targets that you set yourself? Now, just because they are hard to achieve doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have a hard to achieve target, but I think we have reached the point where hard to achieve is one thing, impossible to achieve is another. And, in some of the targets we are moving strongly into that territory. I think one would need to do that exercise first and I think there is a case for revisiting some of our targets so that we can see what is achievable and maybe we will have to revise some of them down in the short term and if there is a budgetary consequence to that then obviously we will have to address that because it could still take more money to achieve a lower target.”

Those are the indications from the Minister for Employment and Learning, which are contrary to what he may have said publicly two or three weeks ago.

When it comes to the budgetary situation, and the consequences of what we are discussing and voting on today, the sands are beginning to shift. In my view, the sands have shifted quite remarkably, even in the past two or three weeks since the last occasion when we were on the Floor of the Assembly discussing the issue of how we spend our Budget and what the priorities in the Budget should be.

Look at the evidence of the past two weeks, which is available for all to see, and which Mr Basil McCrea said that he picked up from constituents and businesses in his part of the world. Let us rehearse and remind ourselves of what the evidence has been in the past 14 days in respect of how the economic situation in the North has developed and why we should now be seen to respond to those developments in a way that does what the Minister said, which is to revisit some of the Budget priorities. In January, the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits went up 2,200 to 38,400, which is a bad figure. However, behind that there is even worse news. The annual increase in unemployment in Northern Ireland over the past year is the highest in nearly 40 years. If one looks behind that, the number of jobs lost in Northern Ireland in the

year up to January was 14,700 — the largest recorded rise in the history of Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, 80% of that occurred in the last six months of 2008 alone. Therefore, the figures, evidence and information that have come into the public domain over the past two weeks show that the situation is becoming more acute and that it requires a more interventionist and acute response from Government.

2.15 pm

Considering how that is reflected in Northern Ireland's constituencies and wards gives one a sense of why Government must urgently revisit the Budget: on 18 February, we had the loss of 21 jobs at Zavvi in Belfast city centre; on 13 February, Stream indicated that it might seek redundancies; on 28 February, we heard from Wrightbus that 235 jobs could go to the wall; and as I speak, Translink is in conversation with its employees about potential redundancies. The service sector — in past years a key reason for unemployment falling to an historic low — is now experiencing its fastest rate of unemployment growth in a decade.

That is what is on public record in the past two weeks alone; the next two weeks may be no better. In those circumstances, I hope that the Minister will look again and reconsider what he said this morning — the re-ordering of Budget allocations.

In an effort to be constructive, I say to the Minister that, at this time, there are reasons why re-ordering Budget allocations and making appropriate interventions have particular added value. I will not rehearse the SDLP's argument — investment in social housing is the best delivery mechanism by which to achieve the biggest impact in the shortest time across a range of indicators. That argument is self-evident and compelling; I do not intend to repeat it.

However, there are other sectors in which appropriate intervention now can make a difference. Given comments made by the Minister of Finance and Personnel's colleague Mr Sammy Wilson some of what I will say may be particularly timely and appropriate.

However, there have been some opportunities for our manufacturing and wider industry base in the North in the past two weeks. Willis, a company that makes water-heating systems, secured a major contract in North America to supply its energy-saving solar devices. At the same time, jobs were created in Newry by GEM and in other IT back-office support work. A huge investment is being made on the headland between Whitehead and Larne, not far from the Environment Minister's constituency, to store wind power in caverns to create green, clean and cheap energy.

Bearing in mind the general economic performance of the North over the past two weeks, those are clear examples of where to target and to direct economic

interventions. In the past fortnight, the Manufacturing Forum said that in its view INI was not fit for purpose in trying to sustain the North's manufacturing base beyond the IT and the financial sectors. That should prompt the Government, the Finance Minister and his colleague in DETI to consider what interventions are needed to maximise those industries and manufacturers that — even in the present difficult environment — are demonstrably fit for purpose, fit for competition and fit for business.

I will make two final comments. In many ways, they are small and symbolic matters because the SDLP has indicated that it will publish a wide range of proposals on the readjustment of the Budget in an effort to ensure that the Executive and the Assembly are fit for the challenges that Northern Ireland people expect them to address.

These two issues were mentioned by one or two other Members earlier in the debate. The first is the issue of the Civil Service bonuses for which the Budget makes provision. As Members are aware, evidence given to the Committee for Finance and Personnel indicated that all permanent secretaries received maximum bonuses in the past year.

In a reply to a question for oral answer in the House on 23 February 2009, the Minister said that he had received a report on Civil Service pay and bonuses. I look forward to what the Minister does in due course about that report. I do not understand how bonuses are being paid at such a level when there may be issues about the conduct and management of Government. That suggests that there should be a question mark over whether those maximum bonuses should be paid.

I could give many examples, but I will give only two because I want to be cautious. The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education have now spent almost six years undertaking a review of teacher training in the North. The Minister for Employment and Learning said that the review had not been his Department's "finest hour". Although a review of a critical issue such as the delivery of teacher-training provision in Northern Ireland has been ongoing for six years, a report has not yet been issued.

The officials who occupy senior positions in Government — some of whom may receive maximum bonuses — should be asked questions about why a situation that the Minister described as not being the Department's finest hour does not have consequences regarding accountability, including personal financial accountability.

Yesterday, we heard that costs that were paid to a member of the legal profession would not have any consequences for the staff in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who may have had some responsibility for, or involvement in, the

management of the Brangam Bagnall and Co contract. It was hoped that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development would raise £200 million from the sale of the Crossnacreevy site, but the Minister now knows that that was a grossly inaccurate assessment of that land's value. Some people now value that land as low as £5 million or £6 million.

Clearly, people gave that advice to the Department, but what are the consequences? Where does the buck stop when it comes to the management of Government in respect of officials who receive state salaries and who may also receive substantial bonuses of up to and including £10,000, which some permanent secretaries received last year?

My only experience of a bonus system is that of the Policing Board. Each year, the Chief Constable comes to the Policing Board and makes recommendations about the senior management team of the PSNI. I assure the House that not every senior police officer in the PSNI receives the maximum bonus every year. There are differentials among the senior officers, which are based on their performance over one year. That is my only experience of the management of a bonus scheme.

I find it difficult to reconcile some of the evidence that I have outlined — and there is much else besides — with the fact that all our permanent secretaries each receive a £10,000 bonus. I ask the Minister to consider those issues when the time comes to deal with next year's Budget and the payment of those bonuses.

The measures that I have outlined are small and symbolic but, over the course of two years, can have a significant impact on the Budget. When the SDLP publishes its wider proposals, they will have a more significant impact on the Budget than those I have mentioned. The proposals will mention the number of senior civil servants at grade 5 and above in each Department — the staff who receive the types of bonuses that I am talking about.

From my experience of Government, I know that there are many good officials across all Civil Service ranks, including the senior ranks. I acknowledge their work and compliment them on it. However, as the Minister might be aware, the SDLP has tabled a question to all Departments in the past three weeks. The question asked about the total number of staff in each Department, and, in particular, the number of staff in senior grades — that is grade 5 and above.

To date, virtually every Department has responded, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. The only Department that has not yet responded is the Department of Finance

and Personnel. The Minister has written to me to say that he intends to reply as soon as he can, and I look forward to receiving that response.

However, the question is a serious one, and it may be particularly serious for DFP, which some say has a much greater number of senior civil servants than other Departments. Not only must we view those matters in the light of efficiency and performance, but we must consider other questions, too: what is the right profile of senior civil servants at grade 5 or above across the range of Departments, and what opportunities may exist, over two years of spending rounds, to reconfigure that number and make some savings?

Those are only a flavour of the issues that the SDLP and I believe need to be addressed. I ask the Minister to reply to some of those questions today, if he cannot reply to all of them. In particular, will he enlighten us further as to what he meant this morning in his reply to Simon Hamilton's question about dioxins and the housing budget? The Minister said that there could be, subject to Executive review, a reordering of Budget allocations.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member was not in the Chamber to listen to most of the debate — he was obviously tied up elsewhere — but he made the longest contribution to it at the very end.

I will try to reply to most of the points that relate to the debate. Obviously, today's debate is on the Budget Bill, which is necessary to ensure that there is the legal authority to pay money to the various Departments. Many of the issues that were raised, particularly those that were raised in the last speech, have nothing whatsoever to do with the Budget Bill. However, I will answer some of those questions in due course.

I want to record my thanks to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its assistance in the accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly, a process with which the House is, by now, well acquainted. The Committee's assistance will enable the Bill to receive Royal Assent by 31 March and will thus facilitate a smooth continuation of public services into the new financial year. I join Members in welcoming the fact that the Bill has been unanimously supported — despite initial indications from certain quarters that they would oppose the Bill and table amendments to it, nothing transpired in the end. I very much welcome that, as, I am sure, will the people of Northern Ireland, given that, as a result of the Bill, money will continue to be paid to Departments after 31 March.

I will try to deal with some of the issues that were raised. It will not be possible to deal with all of them, given the amount of time that has already been expended and the fact that the debate ranged far and wide, over a large number of areas.

2.30 pm

I will pick up on a number of themes. An issue was raised in relation to what more the Assembly and the Executive could be doing, and reference was made to the Obama package. That is a staggering contrast when one considers the powers and the remit of the Assembly in comparison with the situation in the US. It is an interesting comparison. Nevertheless, with regard to borrowing —

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, I will carry on and try to get through as many points as I can. Reference was made to borrowing and to capital investment. I remind Members who talked about borrowing that Northern Ireland has borrowing powers that Scotland, for instance, does not have. Indeed, Scotland and Whitehall are debating that issue. Some Members said that Northern Ireland should be doing what other places are doing with regard to borrowing. However, we are borrowing hundreds of millions of pounds under much more favourable terms than those negotiated under the previous Assembly. The previous terms lumbered us with a tie-in to council tax increases in England as regards the rate of interest.

The terms were renegotiated by our party, and they represent a better deal for the people of Northern Ireland. This is no thanks to the SDLP, whose Members give us plenty of advice, but who got that matter spectacularly wrong even though they had responsibility for the finance portfolio at the time. They were obviously asleep at the wheel. The fact is that we have borrowing powers and we are utilising them. To put the record straight, Scotland would like to have such powers.

As I said in my statement on the February monitoring round this morning, there is a net capital investment of £1.5 billion, which is a vast increase compared to what was happening under direct rule, and it is an increase of between 30% and 40% on what was being spent last year. That money is going into schools, hospitals, roads and housing, and so on.

In December, I announced in the Assembly that a number of projects and programmes were being held up as a result of legal challenges to the frameworks. Without having to get advice from anyone, we took action to accelerate that expenditure to ensure that those projects would go to market and would not get caught up in those frameworks. As a result, £115 million of work is coming to market. Those are important issues to remember.

In December, the Chancellor said in his pre-Budget report that Northern Ireland had the capacity to bring forward money from 2009-2010 into this financial year and from 2010-11 into the next financial year. We have already done that in respect of this financial year, and we will look at what we can do for next year: we will

take that decision in due course. Therefore, we are delivering the investment strategy, we are accelerating expenditure, where possible, and we are taking action with respect to procurement to ensure that money is not held up.

A number of comparisons were made between expenditure in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. We are taking whatever measures we can to bring forward expenditure in line with the Chancellor's announcement in the pre-Budget report.

During the debate, Basil McCrea — who has now gone to another event but was present for most of the debate — mentioned a number of matters in which further action might be taken. He suggested that, in the current climate, we should cut rates further. As I said earlier, we are introducing a small business rates relief scheme, and we are taking measures to ensure that from April 2009 further help will come to businesses through freezing the regional rate in real terms.

Of course, rates are made up of two elements — the regional rate and the district rate. One can continue to take measures as far as the regional rate is concerned, and we have done so.

Mr McCrea is a member of Lisburn City Council, which, along with many other councils, decided to increase the district rate. He asks what more can be done about rates: I respectfully suggest that, as a member of that council, he might want to consider what he can do. The Assembly has frozen the regional rate, and if he feels so strongly about the matter, he may want to do something about the district rate. That is a logical suggestion.

Mr McCrea mentioned that one way in which to pay for that is through an examination of public-sector pay. He was frank and open enough to admit that that is a brave thing to say, and he conceded that he might be a lone voice. When Members speak of teachers' and nurses' pay, they should be aware of the legal liabilities contracted as a result of national agreements. Public-sector wages are of significant benefit to local businesses. However, I heard what Mr McCrea said from the Benches, and his suggestion was also mooted in the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) report, which was described by Mr McNarry as a "worthy" report. Mr McCrea's proposal — or suggestion — that public-sector pay should be examined would not be widely welcomed across Northern Ireland in the current economic climate, particularly among those in the public sector. It will be interesting to see what emerges in policy development on that subject. Mr McCrea made the proposal, and I am sure that people will want to explore it in further detail. It is not on my agenda or on that of my party, but it will be interesting to see whether it gains currency in other quarters.

A number of other matters were raised. Mr Farry mentioned several issues. Mr O'Loan referred to a discrepancy between what officials in DFP have said and what I have said. He said that, in some Committee or other, DFP officials seemed to have supported a proposition that he had put forward about programmes that had run their course. I reject that interpretation entirely and so would the officials concerned. It is invidious to quote officials in a debate when they have no right to respond. If he wants to bait the Minister, he should do that, but he should not bait officials.

The Programme for Government put in place the primacy of growing a dynamic and innovative economy. As a result of that, the Budget is aligned to take account of that strategic priority over three years, and measures have been taken to implement it. During the year, through the in-year monitoring process, money has been redistributed where reduced requirements have been declared. That has boosted expenditure in a number of areas, particularly agriculture, roads, education and, in the Department for Social Development, the housing budget.

Reduced requirements are surrendered by Departments that are no longer in a position to spend the money on the purposes for which it was allocated. Therefore, it must be returned to the centre for reallocation by the Executive. The decision to reallocate the moneys in-year was taken unanimously in December. There is, however, a difference between that and the decision taken by DSD in January to manage its own budget proactively and to reallocate money from urban regeneration to the social housing budget. I welcome that: I had urged that decision and was happy to accommodate it.

As I said earlier in my statement on the February monitoring round, it shows that, when it comes to helping the construction industry or other priorities, in many cases, there is often greater flexibility and room for manoeuvre for Ministers in their own Departments. They have vastly more resources at their disposal in their budgets than the Executive have in an in-year monitoring process. Often, a large degree of those budgets will have been allocated; however, if Ministers so wish, there may be room to reprioritise. That money often dwarfs the amount of money that is available in-year for reallocation.

Mr Attwood referred to comments that were made earlier in the debate. I will clarify the situation for his benefit, because he was not here for the entire debate, so I do not know what he heard or picked up. When Mr Attwood, anyone other Member or anybody outside the House talks about reprioritising or reordering the Budget, what must happen is that money must come out of other Departments' budgets in order to pay for that. In response to his question on the dioxins incident, that is what happened there. Departments had to give up money, and surrender it in a certain way, so that it

could be redistributed. The Executive made the decision that that was a priority that they wanted to meet. There is no option that allows us have more money for X that does not entail taking money out of Y.

That may be a difficult concept to understand, or, indeed, that may be what Mr Attwood and others intend to propose. We will all be interested to hear which budgets will be affected. I have no doubt that any proposal will be framed in the context of red tape and bureaucracy, and all that. However, if money is to be taken out of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Regional Development or any other Department, Mr Attwood must be clear on that.

I am the one who has been pointing out to Members — whether they be Mr McNarry of the Ulster Unionists, Mr O'Loan, or others who are coming forward to say that we must revisit the Budget — that it is open to Ministers, within their remit, to reprioritise funds or to spend money differently. However, if those Members are saying that they want to reorder the Budget's priorities — in other words, re-examine departmental baselines — they must be open and honest, and say that that means taking money out of other Departments, because it is not me who is suggesting that.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is in the Chamber, and he has not come to me to say that that is what he wants to happen, nor has any other Minister. I think that all Ministers would indicate that they are spending their budgets in accordance with the Programme for Government. Much of the money that is being spent on capital investment is not only delivering better services and infrastructure for the people of Northern Ireland but is helping the construction industry at this time. Roads, hospitals, schools, education colleges, water plants, sewerage plants and other infrastructure cannot be built without such projects helping the construction industry. Of course, housing is included in that, and we have already indicated our position on that. There should be no lack of clarity on that matter.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No. We listened to Mr Attwood for half an hour, which really did stretch the limits. Instead of his trying to put words into my mouth, I have stated my position and pointed out the consequences of what people are suggesting.

At the end of the day, I am only one Minister, and if the Executive make a decision that they wish to take money out of one budget and put it into another, that is a matter for the Executive to agree on. I dare say, however, that there will not be much suggestion for that money to come out of one budget in particular. That is fair enough, but each party, and each relevant

and responsible Minister, will make the case for the Departments for which they hold the ministerial portfolio. I am simply pointing out a fact of life.

If I had more money, or if the Executive or the Assembly had more money coming from outside sources, such as Westminster — highly unlikely in the current circumstances — we would be in a different position, and, as such, we could have a debate on to where those extra resources should go.

In order to help our economy, we must ensure that we have proper delivery of the Programme for Government and the Budget; that all the money that is being spent is being properly and fully spent; that we do not end up in a situation in which money is handed back to the Treasury; and that we do not end up in a situation in which Ministers do not deliver on their investment strategies.

At the moment, Departments are telling the Department of Finance and Personnel that they are on track to deliver on their capital expenditure budgets, and that is to be welcomed. The out-turn of that will be seen in June, but it is important to stress that the Budget Bill seeks the authority and the legal cover to ensure that the changes that have taken place in-year are able to be carried through and that there is cover for expenditure for the first few months of the next financial year. I commend the Bill to the House.

2.45 pm

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 5/08] do now pass.

Health Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Health Bill [HL] dealing with tobacco, and powers of suspension in relation to members of NHS bodies and other bodies concerned with health.

The Health Bill [HL] was introduced to Westminster on 15 January 2009, and it deals with a number of issues arising from the report entitled ‘High Quality Care For All’, which resulted from Lord Darzi’s review of the Health Service in England. The measures in the Bill apply mainly to the service in England, but they include specific proposals that are relevant to the devolved Administrations.

In the case of Northern Ireland, those include tobacco restrictions. Last month, I announced plans to remove cigarette displays in shops and to prevent underage access to vending machines. In addition, the Bill covers the introduction of new powers of suspension or removal of Northern Ireland members of UK-wide health bodies. I could have brought the legislation forward as an Assembly Bill, but it was essential that the legislation, particularly in relation to tobacco, was available at the earliest possible date in order to protect our children and young people.

The key provision of the Health Bill [HL] is the removal of displays of tobacco products at points of sale from retail outlets. The provision will grant new powers to my Department to allow that step to be introduced to Northern Ireland and to make decisions on where exemptions may apply. The main objective of the legislation is to reduce the number of children and young people who take up smoking. It will also support and help those who are trying to quit smoking.

Following the ban on the advertising and promotion of tobacco in 2002, the tobacco industry has responded by making displays increasingly larger — so much so that they are now a greater source of promotion and temptation to children and adults alike. Research shows that children and young people are particularly susceptible to advertising and that those who are exposed to tobacco advertising are more likely to take up smoking.

As a reformed smoker who started to smoke in my youth, I know only too well the damage that tobacco can do and how addictive it is. Thankfully, I no longer smoke, but I only wish that I had not started in the first place. I know that, particularly in today’s media-friendly environment, smoking can be portrayed as being cool. Advertising is making the decisions for children, and, before they realise it, they are hooked. Every action must be taken to prevent children from

getting on that malignant conveyor belt, which leads only to addiction and ill health.

The Bill also proposes provisions that would grant powers to my Department to control the sale of tobacco products from vending machines. The new powers will allow either for the prohibition of such machines or for age restrictions to prevent people who are under 18 years of age accessing them.

Vending machines currently provide a common and easily accessible source of tobacco for young people. Figures from the British Heart Foundation estimate that there could be as many as 1,500 children in Northern Ireland aged between 11 and 15 years who access their cigarettes locally from vending machines. At present, because vending machines are self-service, no routine age checks are carried out prior to purchase. That is why the restrictions are being introduced.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No, I will finish my speech. I understand that Members will want to make comments then, after which I will make my winding-up speech; I think that that is the best way to proceed. Members will all have an opportunity to get on their feet and make points, which I can address during my winding-up speech.

Smoking remains the single biggest cause of preventable illness and premature death in Northern Ireland. Every year, around 2,300 people die from smoking-related illnesses. It is a major risk factor for serious health conditions such as coronary heart disease and strokes. It is also a major cause of health inequalities and is a principal cause of the gap in life expectancy between the rich and the poor. That is especially the reason that I am setting up a public health agency to tackle those inequalities.

I am sure that Members would agree that those statistics are shocking. As a society, we have a duty to protect our children from harm. As Health Minister, I have a duty to promote the good health and well-being of Northern Ireland's entire population. I make no apology for doing so. However, I have a particular responsibility to safeguard the most vulnerable groups, especially children.

We are all proud of the immense contribution that the cancer centre at the City Hospital makes to our Health Service. Pioneered by world-leading experts such as Professor Paddy Johnston and Professor Roy Spence, it is now recognised as an international centre of excellence. By investing at an early stage, we have made enormous strides in treating and thwarting cancer. During a visit to the centre last year, Paddy Johnston told me that if smoking were eradicated, lung cancer would hardly register as a statistic. That is a startling fact, which must not be forgotten. Indeed, in the words of Action Cancer:

“Every young person who takes up smoking is a potential cancer patient.”

Although much has been achieved in the field of cancer prevention, more is required. In 2008, I announced my intention to develop a radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital to cater for patients in the west of the Province. That development has arisen in a further effort to treat patients as early as possible and as a result of increasing demand.

This morning, I listened to media reports on the matter. I must say that I am disappointed that some people are attempting to question the Bill's validity. I appreciate the concerns of some people in Ballymena about the Japan Tobacco International plant. However, I understand that much of its produce is exported outside of Northern Ireland. I also recognise the concerns of retailers who are worried that the Bill will have an impact on their businesses. I have agreed to meet industry representatives and shop stewards in the near future.

I remind Members that when smoking controls were introduced to ban smoking in restaurants and pubs, major concerns were raised about pub closures. Those concerns were unfounded. In fact, following the introduction of legislation on smoke-free premises in 2007-08, around 21,000 people set a date to quit the habit through the smoking-cessation services. That figure represents an increase of over 7,500 — or 56% — on the figure for the same period of the previous year. That is a success story on which I am determined to build.

I have said that I want to introduce the measures as early as possible. I hope that that can happen by 2010. I have not stipulated an exact date in 2010. Indeed, the legislative timescale in Northern Ireland means that a start date is not likely before July 2010. However, we cannot afford to delay the introduction of the measure. The Republic of Ireland has adopted similar legislation, which commences on 1 July 2009.

England, Scotland and Wales intend to adopt similar measures between 2011 and 2013. As Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom to share a land border with another European state, I do not want to wait four years. I am in the business of saving lives. If it is good enough to introduce the legislation in four years, we should not wait any longer than necessary. We must not put wealth before health. Are people really asking me to put economic concerns on tobacco sales before the health of our children? It is a matter of conscience, and I cannot do that.

We cannot, and must not, ignore the facts. In 2007, almost 9% of children in Northern Ireland aged between 11 and 16 were regular smokers; those children are three times more likely to die of cancer due to smoking than someone who starts in their mid-twenties. In fact, the vast majority of adult smokers in Northern Ireland

— 77% — started in their teens. Exposure to tobacco products increases the likelihood that a child will start to smoke, and countries that remove tobacco displays have experienced decreases in smoking prevalence among young people. Iceland has reported a decrease of more than 7% among 15- to 16-year-olds, and Canada has experienced a reduction of 10% over five years among 15- to 19-year-olds.

I will take every step possible to prevent our children from accessing cigarettes. Making cigarettes less accessible will discourage children and teenagers from smoking in the first place and will mean that they do not have a habit to carry into adult life. I ask all Members to support the motion, which is an important step in improving the public health of the population and helping to prevent deaths and illness caused by smoking.

I want to highlight the proposal to extend provisions that allow for the suspension of non-executive appointees on the boards of National Health Service bodies to enable the investigation of any concerns about their performance or activities. I must emphasise that that element of the Bill applies primarily to the National Health Service in England. However, as two of the bodies have Northern Ireland appointees, it requires the Assembly's consent.

At present, the options to address concerns about the performance of a non-executive director are, for many NHS bodies, limited. Where problems with non-executive appointees are identified, they would either be allowed to continue in their role, their resignation would be sought or their appointment would be terminated. The Bill proposes a suspension option to enable an investigation to take place while temporarily removing an appointee from his or her position. It is argued that that option provides greater assurances on public finances and patient safety and allows appointees to make representations on their own behalf. In Northern Ireland, those provisions will apply to only two UK-wide bodies to which we make appointments — the Human Tissue Authority and the Health Protection Agency.

The legislation will contribute significantly towards the primary aim of reducing the appeal and uptake of smoking among young people. The suspension provision aims to strengthen the ability to hold to account those who accept public office. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have been asked to speak on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and to relay the Committee's views in the absence of the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, who are on other Committee business.

As the motion indicates, the Health Bill [HL], which is being debated in Westminster, contains two provisions

that relate to Northern Ireland and require the approval of the Assembly, namely the introduction of further tobacco restrictions and powers to suspend chairpersons and non-executive appointees of certain bodies. My comments, on behalf of the Committee, relate to the proposed tobacco restrictions.

In December 2008, the Minister informed the Committee in writing about the proposals on the sale of tobacco, and at its meeting on January 15, the Committee was content to note those proposals. In February, the Minister again wrote to the Committee to advise that the Bill had been introduced at Westminster and that he intended to proceed to introduce this legislative consent motion. The issue was further considered by the Committee at its meeting on Thursday of last week.

3.00 pm

The main issue of interest to the Health Committee relates to the proposed tobacco restrictions. Those are, as the Minister has indicated, the banning of the display of tobacco at the point of sale and the banning or restricting of the sale of tobacco from vending machines. In considering the issue, the Committee has had representations from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) and received a written statement from Gallaher Ltd on behalf of Japan Tobacco International. A letter from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to the Health Minister was also copied to the Committee.

The members of the Health Committee recognise that the measure is intended to further restrict the easy accessibility of tobacco products and further discourage smoking among young people. We fully supported the ban on smoking in public places when it was introduced, and we appreciate that the measure before the House today is another small step in the battle to prevent death and disease caused by smoking.

The first priority and major concern of the Health Committee must always be to ensure the health of the community. We are very concerned about the impact of smoking, and particularly the number of premature deaths from coronary heart disease and cancers that are caused by smoking each year.

The Independent Retail Trade Association was keen to stress to the Committee that it in no way opposed the legislation, that it takes its role in the community very seriously, and wants to play its part in protecting public health. Its concern was solely in relation to the timescale for implementing the changes. The association argued that in England and Wales, retailers will be given until 2013 to make the necessary changes; the Health Minister has indicated that he intends to implement them here from next year.

NIIRTA also claimed that it will cost each small retailer around £5,000 to make the necessary changes

to comply with the legislation and that for many small local shops, particularly in the present economic climate, it could mean the difference between survival and closure.

The Committee is fully aware of the role of small local shops in our communities and has no wish to see any small businesses go to the wall. Nevertheless, the Committee must be mindful of its health responsibilities, and it unanimously agreed to support the motion. The Committee also agreed to ask the Minister to consider carefully the views of the Independent Retail Trade Association and others about how and when the legislation is implemented. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion in principle as presented to the House by the Minister today. It is important to note that today's debate is only about endorsing the principle of the extension of the Bill to Northern Ireland, and that before any implementation of the legislation takes place, the Minister has to bring it back to the Executive.

There is no doubt that whatever measures are put in place to discourage children and young people from the deceptive notion that there is something glamorous about smoking must be welcomed. Children who smoke become addicted to tobacco for years, which in many cases leads to life-threatening diseases and premature death. Therefore, for the overall health of the people, it is important that our young people are weaned off that notorious habit. However, any new legislation must be introduced in a balanced and equitable way that creates a level playing field for small businesses and their counterparts in the UK.

I have concerns about the Minister's time frame. He has stated that he wants to force through the changes by 2010. That creates a concern for small businesses and retailers, who have already taken their role in combating the problem of smoking among the young seriously, and play a key enforcement role in ending the sale of tobacco products to underage children. They could now face, as has been mentioned, an average bill of around £5,000 to make the necessary changes to their premises by 2010.

Therefore, it is important that in the midst of this economic downturn, small businesses in Northern Ireland are treated on a par with their UK counterparts, which will have until 2013 to make such changes.

The owners of small businesses are not opposed to the motion; they can and will comply with the legislation when it is introduced. Yet, given the total impact on our 3,000 local shops, at a cost to our economy of almost £15 million at a time of recession, it is only right and proper that they have the same lead-in time as that afforded to their UK counterparts.

We must remember that the Executive have pledged to help small businesses, especially in the next 12 months. Therefore, to force this ban through by next year will have detrimental consequences for many of those small businesses. That is why I said at the outset that the Minister must take the proposal back to an Executive meeting before the implementation of any legislation. I am confident that a balanced view will be adopted at such a meeting.

I note that the Minister's colleague, the shadow Front Bench Minister for Health, Mike Penning MP, has said that the Conservative Party is opposed to the ban. In an article in 'Retail Express' magazine, he said that the ban could be the end of corner shops in most communities, as bigger shops will be able to absorb it but small shops will really suffer. I wonder how that position will affect the new marriage arrangements that have been made by the Conservative and Ulster Unionist Parties.

In concluding, however, I ask the Minister to give some indication as to whether smoking among our young people has increased or decreased in the past 18 months to two years as a result of the tobacco-control measures that are already in place and are being implemented.

Mr McCallister: It is good that Mr Buchanan is worried about my party's marital arrangements. I am sure that he has never disagreed with his wife.

What does the DUP think devolution is about? It is about the Assembly agreeing a policy, or deciding what is best for Northern Ireland. That is why the Minister will have the power to decide on the matters at hand. Mr Buchanan began by forcefully making the case for the legislation, and said, honestly, that it was important that it be passed. He then concluded by saying that we should let a few more people die before implementing the legislation and that it should be delayed until 2013.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I will give way, unlike the DUP Members.

Mr Ross: Will the Member accept that there is a difference between wanting to have proposals that will protect young people and stop them smoking, and what is being proposed, which, many people would argue, does not achieve that aim?

Mr McCallister: Then, perhaps, Mr Ross should wonder why the DUP will accept those proposals in 2013. If it is right to introduce them in 2013, surely it is right to do so in 2010.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Why not?

Mr Paisley Jnr: It is not right to introduce the ban earlier, because it will create a distinct disadvantage

for our local traders. In fact, local traders will be expected to pay somewhere in the region of £5,000 to change the tobacco displays in their shops. That will cost Northern Ireland's retail sector £15 million. Retailers in England will have the same costs pro rata but will have until 2013 to change their displays. Our retailers are being told that those changes must be made earlier.

The Member is right: devolution must help local people; it must not disadvantage them. That is the essential point.

Mr McCallister: What of the disadvantage to those who die? Would that not register as a big disadvantage to those young people who become addicted to cigarettes and ruin their health and their lives? This is a public-health issue. The DUP has a track record of opposing a public-health agency.

The DUP seems fixated on making efficiencies, yet it does not say that the Health Service cannot function unless we, as the Minister is doing, place an emphasis on public health, and on guiding its promotion in a manner in which we have never done before. That is what the issue is about.

Mr Paisley Jnr spoke about small traders. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party is very supportive of small businesses. If the Member's colleague the Minister of the Environment were to introduce proposals on draft PPS 5, that would provide a big advantage for small traders. Where is the DUP now? It is silent on that issue.

This is a health issue; it is about public health and about helping to protect our children from getting hooked on cigarettes at a very young age. The harm that smoking causes to children is disproportionate to the harm that it causes people who start later in life. More than 100,000 people across the UK die from smoking-related illnesses each year. The provisions in the Health Bill [HL] are another measure to try to combat that. It is absolutely vital —

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: OK, why not? Even though the Member never gives way to me.

Mr Easton: I am happy to give way to Mr McCallister in this debate. In the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Ulster Unionist Party actually agreed on the way forward. Claire McGill outlined that in her contribution, including the concerns for retailers. In Committee, Mr McCallister said that he supported the stance that retailers should get more time to implement the required changes, yet in the Chamber he says the opposite. Therefore, the Member must make his mind up.

Mr McCallister: I took exactly the same line in Committee as I take now. In Committee, I said that we have big concerns for small retailers. I said that we

need to look at what the costs are. Is that £5,000 a realistic figure, or is it a bogus figure? Has it simply been plucked out of the air? What are the realistic costs? How useful and vital are tobacco sales to small retailers?

What I said — in case Mr Easton cannot remember — is that it is right to introduce the Bill's provisions here. I also said that if 2010 is too soon, or if the timeline proves too tight, and the Minister has already indicated that he is happy to speak to retailers, some flexibility may be possible. However, the ideal scenario is that we move to implement the provisions as quickly as possible. We are the only part of the UK that shares a land border with another EU member state. The Republic of Ireland is moving on the issue this year, so issues will arise.

If it is right to introduce a ban on tobacco displays in 2013, surely it is right to do so as quickly as possible, while taking into account the concerns of retailers and those who must implement the policy. Governments in other parts of the UK can make their own decisions, and the Scots and the Welsh may decide on different timings.

In his opening remarks, the Minister made it clear that he is more than willing to engage in discussions in order to make the transition period as painless as possible. However, we must return to the point that it is a public-health matter. The health and well-being of our young people and of some of the more vulnerable people in our society is at stake.

Mr Neeson: Does the Member agree that in many parts of Northern Ireland, small retailers' tobacco sales are hit hardest by tobacco smugglers?

Mr McCallister: The Member is correct. Whether it be smuggling, theft and other illegal activities or be it PPS 5, the final version of which the DUP must get on with and publish, much is hurting small traders. A great deal can be done to help retailers. The measure concerns public health, and I urge Members to stay on the public-health agenda.

The Minister gave some figures: in 2007, 9% of children in Northern Ireland aged between 11 and 16 were regular smokers, and 80% of that group were addicted by the age of 19.

3.15 pm

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Well, why not.

Mr Ross: I will return the favour later. I have been listening to the Member speak for several minutes, and he is giving an emotional argument about how banning cigarette displays will save lives. Will he tell us how the proposal to ban the display of cigarettes will stop people taking up smoking when there is already existing legislation to stop young people from smoking? What

will that do to improve public health, because he has not outlined that yet?

Mr McCallister: One would think that Mr Ross had just arrived in the Chamber. His colleagues support the motion in principle, yet say that it is fine to ban tobacco displays in 2013, but not in 2010 or 2011 or whatever date is decided. If it is right to do it —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I will, certainly. *[Interruption.]* If it is right —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Several Members want to talk at the moment — we will all be puffing if we carry on this way. So, Mr McCallister, do you wish to give way to a Member on your right?

Mr McCallister: Ms Sue Ramsey.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I did not want to intervene, because it is quite useful to watch the theatre that is going on in the Assembly. I remind the Member of the debate that we had on banning smoking in public places, and I will speak in the debate later.

One argument that was made to the Health Committee was that there would be a downturn in the number of people attending theatres if smoking was not allowed on the stage. The Assembly did not accept that bogus argument and supported the ban on smoking in public places. I am, therefore, concerned about people cherry-picking issues on smoking cessation.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for her intervention. That could be argued for just about every issue. For example, the Minister mentioned that the smoking ban was supposed to be the death knell for pubs and clubs. The same argument could be made about drinking and driving and rural pubs, although no one would support that.

Mr Ross might not think that it is right to introduce the ban in 2013, and that is fine. That is a matter for him. In that case, why does Mr Ross's party support the principle of the motion but he just does not want the ban on tobacco displays until 2013? The policy works or it does not — it has worked in other parts of the world, such as Canada, which has a system — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Mr Ross to make his remarks through the Chair.

Mr McCallister: I have already given way and I have been very generous in the number of interventions that I have taken from Mr Ross — his party does not usually extend the same courtesy to me or any of my colleagues.

The point is that this issue is about public health and about sending out a clear message. The Minister will, I believe, work with retailers, because the issue is not

about hurting small businesses, it is about health. The intention is to get this policy to work and to improve public health and keep children safe and away from smoking. That is what the debate must focus on. If it is right to ban tobacco displays in 2013, it is right to do it now as quickly as possible, and work with the industry to achieve the easiest and most painless way forward.

I commend the motion to the Chamber.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the legislation and the opportunity for us in Northern Ireland to play our part in removing displays of tobacco at the point of sale — in other words, taking them from the sight of customers.

As a member of the Health Committee and a health professional, we must support our health colleagues, whether those working in hospitals, those who work for organisations such as Chest, Heart and Stroke Northern Ireland and the British Heart Foundation, and the cancer charities — the people who are tackling this issue at the coalface need our support. I am hopeful that this movement, along with other work and initiatives in education and health promotion, will deter young people in particular from starting to smoke.

Some excellent research supports the view that advertising normalises and, for some people, glamorises smoking. We want to support small retailers, who are often at the centre of communities, and we will work with them to implement the concealment of their tobacco products. However, our support must not cost people their lives.

The Minister outlined the awful cancer statistics, and he described the huge and growing gap between the rich and the poor in our society. Many of the people who smoke have neither the time nor the support to kick the habit; it is so highly addictive that doing so is extremely difficult.

I am not sure whether vending machines are included in the legislation, and perhaps the Minister will clarify whether any decision has been taken on their location. If they are to be locked, how will that be policed? Perhaps the Assembly is missing an opportunity and should be banning all vending machines.

Mr McCarthy: I support the Bill. Given that the Assembly is debating an extremely serious subject, I am slightly disappointed by the flippant attitude of the DUP.

Mr Paisley Jnr: What about the effect on jobs?

Mr McCarthy: The DUP talks about jobs, but health should be its priority, as it is mine.

Tobacco kills — full stop. The Assembly must show leadership, as it has done in the past, and I have no doubt that it can rise to the occasion again. The changes will cause some pain to shopkeepers, and the Alliance

Party sympathises with them. However, they will find ways and means to overcome any difficulties.

The objective of the Bill is simply to protect children and young people from becoming hooked on what I call “coffin nails” — Members know what will happen to the majority of smokers. I do not know why it has taken the Government so long to tackle the scourge of tobacco. The figures show that some 700 unfortunate people in Northern Ireland die from preventable lung cancer every year. The Assembly can, and must, help to stamp out the suffering of smokers and their families. I hope that the Assembly will support the Bill.

I pay tribute to the various bodies in Northern Ireland that have promoted, and continue to promote, the no-smoking philosophy. The Health Promotion Agency, the Ulster Cancer Foundation and Action Cancer, together with other bodies, help smokers and, in particular, young people to kick the habit or not to start smoking in the first place.

The Bill should help to prevent young people from starting to smoke. Surely that is the goal of everyone, in the Chamber and in Northern Ireland, who subscribes to the philosophy of prevention being better than cure. Not only will that give young people a healthy start in life, but in years to come, it will relieve the Health Service of massive expenditure that could be invested in important front line services. From time to time — indeed, at every opportunity — everyone in the Chamber complains about the lack of some type of health provision.

The Minister was brave enough to say that he was a smoker in his youth. I am not sure how many other Members smoked at that time, but I can commiserate with the Minister. A long, long time ago, I remember jumping onto a tractor and cart being driven by my brother. I took out a packet of fags and some matches, and I lit up.

My brother told me that I would rue the day that I had lit that cigarette. I told him not to be silly. It took me 35 years after that fag to rue the day: 35 years of coughing, spluttering, fighting for breath and not being able to play hurley or football. That is the effect of young people getting hooked on these coffin nails.

People should remember that we have to get through to the young people. There is criticism from the DUP about what that has got to do with the Bill. These people are not stupid. They know that advertising is big business, and they advertise. No matter what product is advertised, people will buy it. They will get hooked on it. That is what this is all about; to try and prevent them from smoking in the first instance.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Maybe the Member is not aware — maybe he did not see it through the cloud of smoke — that the advertising of tobacco products was banned

several years ago. The debate is not about banning advertising. There is nothing to do with advertising in the Bill — maybe he has not read it.

Mr McCarthy: I am sorry; the Member seems to have wrongly picked up what I was saying. If one goes into a shop and sees some glamorous colours — whatever they are advertising — one is attracted to that. Certainly, young people will be attracted to that.

I fully support the efforts that are being made by the Minister today. Cigarettes and tobacco products should be out of sight and out of mind, as the Minister has said, and the danger for young people should be out of reach. That is why I support the proposal.

Mr Easton: Thank you, Mr Speaker — sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. You have not been promoted yet.

The motion is critical the health and well-being of our society. I refer to the provision of the Health Bill [HL] in relation to tobacco.

I will focus my remarks on the deadly impact of tobacco and highlight why the banning of advertising of tobacco is in the best interests of our society. There is already much good work being undertaken in advising and educating our populace on the dangers of smoking. Across my constituency of North Down, the local schools — in their personal and social education — focus on the negative impact of smoking and encourage prevention. That is reinforced in churches, youth organisations, voluntary and community sectors — they all deserve praise.

Let us consider why we need to stop advertising that encourages smoking. Across the globe, smoking is one of the foremost causes of disease. Annually, some four million people die from diseases related to smoking. In reality, a life is lost every eight seconds. We know of the 4,000 chemicals inhaled through smoking. We know of the 43 molecules directly linked to cancer, and some 401 others that are toxic or harmful. We do not need to highlight the harm caused by benzene or the wood alcohol, methanol.

It is because of the life-threatening diseases associated with smoking that the provisions of this Bill are key. I am referring to lung cancer, heart attacks, strokes, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and much more. My grandfather died of emphysema, so this is a personal issue for me.

When we consider banning advertising, we do so for clearly defined reasons. Let us consider the facts: 10% of smokers will die before the age of 55, compared with 4% of non-smokers. Let us analyse further: 28% of smokers will die before the age of 65, compared with 11% of non-smokers. Significantly, 57% of smokers will die before the age of 75, compared with 30% of non-smokers.

In the face of this overwhelming evidence, is there anyone who regards the provisions of the Bill as unnecessary? Rather than advertising tobacco, we should be advertising the benefits of giving up smoking. Let us promote the fact that within 20 minutes of your last cigarette, your blood pressure and pulse are returning to normal.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that allowing cigarettes to be displayed in the most prominent position in any retail outlet — directly behind the sales counter — is advertising? That is encouraging and enticing people who shop, and young people in particular, to purchase tobacco and cigarettes that will endanger their health.

Does the Member accept that allowing that to continue permits advertising, which, in turn, encourages more young people to take up the habit?

3.30 pm

Mr Easton: I take on board what the Member said, and I do not disagree. However, some Members are failing to appreciate that no one is against the proposal; everyone is for it. The problem is with time constraints for small businesses and with how they will meet costs. No one is against the Bill, and Ulster Unionist Party Members must accept that point.

Within eight hours of smoking one's last cigarette, carbon monoxide levels in one's blood begin to return to normal. Within a day of smoking one's last cigarette, the risk of having a heart attack has decreased, and within two weeks, lungs and circulation perform more efficiently. Of course, prevention is better than cure, so we want to stop people from taking up smoking, and that would benefit those people, as well as the Health Service.

Having set out the case for banning cigarette advertising, I encourage the Government to focus on the needs of small businesses and independent retailers, which deserve assistance. In many cases, small businesses are the lifeblood of local economies due to the employment that they provide, so they deserve some form of assistance in implementing the provisions of the Bill, which it is estimated will cost each retailer £5,000.

Sadly, small businesses have been the first to feel the bite of the global recession, and they are hurting from the impact of the credit crunch, so they must be given consideration as they carry forward the provisions of the Bill. The people behind those businesses are reasonable and responsible, and they deserve the assistance of the Government in implementing what are reasonable and responsible proposals.

Having said that, the motion is critically important, and the Bill's proposals must be implemented as soon as possible. Every day that the banning of tobacco advertising prevents someone from taking up smoking,

or assists someone in quitting, is a day of healthier living for that individual and a positive day for the Health Service. Therefore, our failure to implement the provisions of the Health Bill is simply not an option.

Mr McCallister suggested that the DUP was opposed to the setting up of the regional agency for public health and well-being. That is not the case, and if he checks the Hansard report, he will discover that we did not vote against it. All we wanted to do was to keep the various agencies within the board, and if he and the people of Northern Ireland read the Hansard report, that will be confirmed.

With regard to Mr McCallister's comments about efficiency savings, the DUP has offered proposals whereby millions of pounds could be saved. Unfortunately, because the ideas are from the DUP, and even though the money could be made available, the Health Minister does not wish to save those nursing jobs and residential homes.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My name is Sue, and I aspire to be a non-smoker. I thought that I should get that out of the way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: We are right behind you.

Ms S Ramsey: I am glad to hear that. I saw Basil coming in, and I thought that Starsky and Hutch were arriving to defend the Minister, although the Minister does not require defending with respect to this Bill — he is quite capable of defending himself. Nevertheless, I am glad to see those Members in the Chamber.

Irrespective of what is happening within the party opposite, most Members have welcomed the opportunity to speak in the debate and will welcome the passage of the motion. I take on board the points raised by Members and people in the community, and I am aware that representatives of the Independent Retail Trade Association are in the Public Gallery.

Nevertheless, public health is the issue at hand and, during the debate, I was struck by the Minister's reference to comments from Professor Paddy Johnston, who we all hold in high esteem as one of the leading lights in cancer research. Those comments helped me, and they raise a subject that must be considered.

In the past couple of days, many statistics emerged in briefing papers that were submitted to the Health Committee, and although I do not intend to go over them, it was made clear that smoking remains the number one cause of preventable deaths. The younger a person starts to smoke, the harder it is for him or her to give up. Kieran McCarthy mentioned that point, and I am sure that a sizeable proportion of Members started to smoke at an early age, because it was perceived to

be the done thing. We must now re-educate people that smoking is wrong.

In an intervention, I mentioned the evidence given to the Committee by people involved in theatres. They argued that the number of people attending theatres would decrease; however, that has not proven to be the case. In fact, in America, the number of people attending theatres has increased as a result of the smoking ban.

Listening to the debate, it struck me that many Members, people and parents in the community criticise big supermarkets and shops for displaying chocolate at checkouts.

The reason why we criticised that was because it influences children and young people as they are going through checkouts. All Members have witnessed that. Bringing children through checkouts, when they see chocolate, becomes a nightmare. It is a battle to try and get kids through checkouts.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I will give way in a second; I want to finish this point. The legislation aims to make tobacco less accessible for children and young people. I know that we are not talking about advertisement, as such; but we are talking about it when we discuss display cabinets. This is about making tobacco products less amenable to children and young people. I take Mr Easton's comments about the retailers on board, and I will speak about that following Basil McCrea's intervention.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Member aware of the new point-of-purchase confectionery stands that are in place in the staff restaurant and in the Members' tearoom? Their effect is to increase the propensity to eat. She should be aware of the damage that creme eggs have caused to my honourable friend Mr McCallister, a man who, we know, is trying to lose a few pounds.

Point-of-sale or point-of-purchase stands — call them what you will — are still the most effective form of advertising bar none, and that is what we are trying to stop.

Ms S Ramsey: I do not know whether the Member is Starsky or Hutch, but I am glad that I gave way to him.

I raised that issue in the canteen the other day. I know that Members will not think it to look at me, but I am not a chocolate eater — I just did not have much luck. Perhaps, had I not started to smoke, and had I continued to play sports, I would not be as heavy as I am.

I agree with Basil McCrea; this is about a mindset. If a number of Members have raised that issue in the canteen, the issue regarding the display of tobacco products must be looked at also.

Earlier, I mentioned Professor Paddy Johnston; and Members should commend him, his staff and others for

their work in this field. The British Medical Association (BMA) is the organisation to which we look for advice and guidance on many health-related matters. In such cases, we always seek advice from the professionals. The BMA welcomes this proposal; but, importantly, it also states that, parallel to this, smoking cessation clinics and other resources should be available in areas where they are needed.

It is not solely a matter of banning smoking in public places or banning the sale of tobacco products; it is about ensuring that the appropriate services are available in the communities that we are talking about targeting. It is imperative that such services are available for the people who want to avail of them and who want to stop smoking.

Claire McGill spoke on behalf of the Health Committee because the Deputy Chairperson is in Great Ormond Street Hospital and the Chairperson — to whom I send best wishes — is off ill. Mrs McGill mentioned the Independent Retail Trade Association. If we, as MLAs, want to do our jobs properly, we should be seen to be acting as a conduit between the community sector and Government and between the community and voluntary sector and business people. If those sections of the community are raising an issue, the Minister must take it on board.

In his speech, the Minister said that he was willing to meet representatives from the Independent Retail Trade Association. That is a positive step, but I do not think that everyone was listening.

We have been told that it will cost up to £5,000 to redesign shop counters. Perhaps I am being naive, but who pays for the construction of the displays? People in the Public Gallery will be interested in that question. I do not want to provide free advertising for any company, but promotions in bars, pubs and clubs are usually paid for, and supplied by, the company being promoted. I am keen to know whether tobacco companies provide the display stands in shops. If they do provide them, who pays for their removal? Will the Minister provide us with a breakdown of costs?

The Minister is right. I welcome his commitment, but, according to some of radio and other media items today, he will be damned if he does and damned if he does not. I also welcome the acknowledgement that we are sharing a land border. The cessation of smoking in public places in the Twenty-six Counties was welcomed here, and we decided to introduce it on an all-Ireland basis. We should not wait until 2013; we should learn the lessons now. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. Right across Britain, approximately 150 children start smoking every day, which, in itself, has got to be a reason for the legislative change. Half of those who go on to become regular smokers will die from diseases caused

by the habit. Research shows that approximately 20% of Britain's 15- to 16-year-olds — 16% of boys and 25% of girls — are regular smokers. Again, that is a cause for concern. That is the case despite an anti-smoking advertising campaign, attempts to educate schoolchildren about the dangers of smoking and the fact that it is now illegal to sell cigarettes to anyone under 18 years of age.

Thair ir neir 114,000 deaths adae wi' smokin' ivry yeir oan un-laafu sales accause they hook weans intae the habit. Quhan cigarettes wur upgraded tae an 18 aige leemit, Deborah Arnott, heidyin o' anti-smokin' charity ASH, leuked fer mair missures includin' a ban oan sellin' cigarettes fae machines. Neir a quarter o'unner aige smokers buy thair cigarettes fae thae machines.

Each year, approximately 114,000 deaths are attributed to smoking that began as a result of illegal sales — children who became hooked. When the age limit for the sale of cigarettes was increased to 18, Deborah Arnott, director of the anti-smoking charity Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), called for further measures to be introduced, including a ban on the sale of cigarettes from vending machines. Almost one quarter of teenage smokers buy their cigarettes from vending machines. Deborah Arnott also said that she wants big increases in the fines that are imposed on retailers who sell cigarettes to underage smokers. She said that she welcomes the raising of the age of purchase but that that will be effective only if the law is properly enforced.

Of those aged 16 and under, a massive 25% have kicked the habit early. That illustrates that the new smoking laws are, at least partially, working. However, the pressure needs to be kept on, and I support the Bill, which allows for further advertising to curb the attraction of cigarettes and is intended to ensure less attractive displays of the product.

Smoking is the biggest cause of preventative death and disease in society. Three quarters of those who smoke started as teenagers. For the overall health of the country, it is vital that further reductions take place. The latest figures show that 24% of those at secondary school smoke in their first five years there, as compared with 33% in 2003. Again, we see a trend away from smoking, which is one that we want to consolidate and improve on. Fewer adults smoking in the home is also a help, but we cannot become complacent. There must be careful observation of those purchasing cigarettes and rigorous enforcement of sanctions on those who make illegal sales to those who are underage.

When the ban on the active promotion of smoking and on cigarette advertising on TV and in other media was first initiated, the cigarette companies' response was to ensure that retail displays became even more

eye-catching and attractive, thus automatically drawing the attention of young people rather than adults to them. In order that we truly follow the ideal of making smoking less attractive to people, while still allowing those who choose to smoke the freedom to do so in their own home, with no knock-on effect on anyone else, we must ensure that smoking is not something that the young people in our communities consider. Possibly the best way in which to do that, as has been suggested in the Chamber already, is to adhere to the maxim, "Out of sight, out of mind".

Research has shown that young people are particularly susceptible to tobacco marketing at the point of sale, and that they are more likely to take up smoking as a result of exposure to such marketing. I have been to restaurants that have a Pringles machine, which vends crisps, right beside the machine that vends cigarettes — the attraction to young people is quite clear. The new proposals will ensure that that will not be an easy pick for young people. The machines will also be restricted to those who are over 18 years of age.

I am aware that the Minister has a desire to push for the changes to be made as soon as possible. Taking into account the fact that we are leading the way in upping the age limit for purchasing cigarettes, I support the drive to end the promotion of smoking and its attraction to young people. As I see it, no one wants a young person to start smoking — I think that we can all accept that, as it is the thrust of the debate. Therefore, the obvious temptation must be taken away. We are not restricting free will for those who are old enough to decide for themselves — any adult, man or woman, who chooses to smoke while knowing the risks has not had the opportunity to do so taken from them. The highlighting aspects of tobacco promotion are merely being removed. That is a good thing.

I am aware of the fears that small-business operators have concerning the issue, and we must understand those as well. I know that those businesses are in no way desiring to entice young people into smoking. They are firm in complying with the law and do not sell cigarettes to those who are underage. Therefore, I was heartened to hear the Minister issue the following promise:

"If the plans go ahead, the Department and local councils will work with relevant organisations in order to provide support, and to minimise any burden on business."

I intend to hold the Minister to that, and I look forward to hearing his implementation plans for that matter.

3.45 pm

As a young boy, I used to visit my grandfather, who smoked cigarettes all his life and lived until his mid-70s. When I was about five years old I asked him what it was like to smoke a cigarette. My grandfather gave me a cigarette and told me to take a deep breath. I turned green and was sick afterwards, and I never had the

wish to touch a cigarette again. That is a pretty drastic course of action, and I am not recommending that we do that. However, there must be some restrictions on promotion and advertising, and the motion does just that.

I was encouraged to hear the Minister confirm that, following the introduction of the smoke-free legislation, we have enjoyed great success, with over 21,000 people setting a quit date through smoking cessation services in 2007-08. The Minister is right: that situation must be built upon, and I believe that the Bill is the way to build upon it and, in doing so, save lives. I support the motion and ask Members to do likewise.

Mr Gardiner: I shall say a few words in support of my honourable friend the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who is introducing this measure today. I also express my gratitude to Mr Shannon for his positive support for the motion — contrary to some of his colleagues, mind you.

When I was my party's environmental spokesman, I believed in the principle that the polluter pays. Now that I am a member of the Health Committee, I believe that that principle should be extended to health legislation. There is no doubt that people who sell, promote for sale, or play a part in introducing young people to use tobacco are polluters. As with the environmental polluters, there is a cost associated with that pollution; as with environmental pollution, that cost is often picked up by the taxpayers.

There can be no doubt that the cost of healthcare directly attributable to the use of tobacco is enormous, as, indeed, is the cost of healthcare associated with the consumption of alcohol. Many smokers end up with serious life-limiting and life-threatening diseases, which have to be treated by the National Health Service at a great cost to the taxpayer and at a time when health budgets are being constrained. Around 75% of all adults in Northern Ireland who smoke started to smoke in their teenage years; 9% of children in Northern Ireland aged between 11 and 16 are now regular smokers. Those children are often three times more likely to die of cancer due to smoking than those who start to smoke in their mid-20s.

Vending machines are the main source of supply of cigarettes for 20% of young people aged between 11 and 15, compared to just 6% of adults. The British Heart Foundation estimates that, across the United Kingdom in 2006, 46,000 children purchased their cigarettes from vending machines.

Today's measure is timely. It is high time that we conformed to new national legislation, which prohibits the display of tobacco products for sale and means that shops that sell tobacco products must keep them out of sight. Cigarette vending machines would be illegal. That measure reduces significantly the ability of teenagers and children to purchase tobacco products,

and it reduces their exposure to visual marketing pressures. It has been shown that, where action has been taken to reduce cigarette advertising, there is an immediate 10% drop in cigarette sales.

For all of those good reasons, I support the Minister's legislative consent motion, and I welcome his comments about his plans to further restrict access to vending machines by those aged under 18. I welcome the comments of those Members who have spoken in support of the motion, and I also commend the Member who spoke on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Ross: In response to Mr McCarthy's accusation that the DUP has a flippant attitude to health, I assure him that that is not the case at all.

However, I want to focus on the part of the Bill that deals with the display of tobacco products. The damage to society and to individual health caused by smoking is clear-cut and indisputable. I have, and will, support measures that will save lives. Indeed, I supported the smoking ban, which, of course, protects non-smokers from inhaling secondary smoke in bars, clubs and restaurants.

I asked the Health Minister what impact the ban has had. It is probably too early for significant evidence to emerge, but a modest decrease in the number of smokers is being seen. More importantly, there is protection for non-smokers who go to restaurants and pubs.

I also supported, and spoke in the House in favour of, raising the age at which one can legally buy tobacco products. I support the Bill's proposals to phase out vending machines and I back the banning of 10-packs of cigarettes, to which young people are more likely to get access. Vending machines in particular can give people who are underage access to cigarettes, and those machines should be phased out.

I also do not believe that it is appropriate to advertise a product that can be so damaging to health. I am aware that some companies, such as Camel, used cartoon characters in an advertising campaign that, it could be argued, specifically targeted children, which is wrong. Of course, I also support any assistance that can be given to people who want to quit smoking.

However, for a number of reasons, I have some difficulties with what is proposed in relation to the display of cigarettes. I hope that the Minister will address some of those issues at the end of the debate, because I asked John McCallister what public health message was sent by banning the displaying of cigarettes. I am glad that Sue Ramsey at least tried to address that matter by explaining that displays could be seen as advertising.

I will go through the difficulties that I have, and I hope that the Minister will respond to them.

Mr B McCrea: Unfortunately, I was not in the Chamber to hear Mr Ross talk about point of sale. However, I will mention in my speech later in the debate that for 10 years I worked for Mars confectionery. I can give Mr Ross exact statistics about the impact of impulse sales from point of purchase. At its most effective, advertising is within the “arc of ease” — so a customer can pick products up. *[Interruption.]*

No, you asked the question, Mr Ross, you said that you did not get an answer. Let me tell you — *[Interruption.]*

I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but once I have the Floor, I have the Floor.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: You asked the question, Mr Ross. You insinuated that Mr McCallister did not give an answer. The answer comes from the UUP clear and loud — advertising is not the way forward for products that kill people.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ross: Well, that was not the question, and Mr McCallister did not answer my question. I will deal with that right now. I have no dispute about what the Member said. However, under current law, under 18s cannot buy tobacco products at the counter. If adults have impulse buys, I will not tell them that they cannot buy something. An adult is old enough to make his or her own decisions, and I do not think that it is the role of Government to interfere in an adult’s decision-making process.

I am not a supporter of big Government or of a nanny state. Ultimately, individuals must take decisions for themselves. I question whether an individual who has never smoked in his or her life would walk into a retail outlet to buy a pint of milk and a loaf of bread, then suddenly impulse buy tobacco products on display behind the counter. A smoker will buy them; a non-smoker will not.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will give way again in a wee minute, because the Member has not spoken yet in the debate, and I am sure that he will address those issues in his speech. I will give way later on.

I just do not believe that that sort of impulse buying will happen. I think that the marketing and displaying of a product is very different from advertising a product, which, in the case of tobacco, was banned many years ago. It is not particularly fair for a retailer to be forced to hide what is still a legal product; albeit, a product that can harm health, which I readily admit. To tell a retailer that he cannot display a legal product is wrong.

On a point that has been made by my party; if the legislation goes through, many retailers who are opposed, but resigned, to the legislation say that they will be disadvantaged, because they must comply with it much more quickly than retailers in GB. I believe that that puts them at a disadvantage, and it is something that I hope that the Minister will reconsider.

Mr Beggs: The Member said that that will put our local retailers at a disadvantage compared to other parts of the United Kingdom. The competition for retail here is between corner shops and supermarkets. If the Member and his party were serious about wanting to protect local shops, we should try to regulate the continual expansion of supermarkets, because that is where the competition is. Why is it taking so long to introduce planning policy statement 5, which will make it more difficult for supermarkets to expand? That is where the real competition is.

Another practical measure that could be taken is to consider cases in which there is a need to support shops because of a lack of choice regarding the small business rates relief. Those are two practical methods of helping local shops. To use this issue to continue to endanger young people’s health is most unfortunate and disingenuous. We should protect our young people’s health and also protect our local shops. Those are two separate issues, and should be dealt with accordingly.

Mr Ross: What is disingenuous is the emotional argument that banning the display of cigarettes will suddenly prevent young people from wanting to smoke. It is illegal for young people to buy tobacco products until they are 18 years old, when they become adults. Schemes to make sure that retailers do not sell tobacco products to under-18s are important. It is also important to prosecute retailers that sell tobacco to under-18s and to prosecute people who buy tobacco products for under-18s.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. I waited patiently, but somebody else jumped the queue. Sue Ramsey indicated that she would like to give up smoking. For people who want to give up smoking, the enticement is in shops when they buy milk or their groceries — tobacco products are right in front of them.

The benefit is not for under-18s in that instance: it is for the people who want to give up smoking. I believe that everybody will join us in saying that we want to see people give up smoking voluntarily.

Mr Ross: I am glad that the Member did not mention how the proposal will save young people, because that is not the issue for over-18s. If somebody is an adult, they are wise enough to decide for themselves whether they will buy something. Plastered all over the displays that are behind the counters is the message that smoking is damaging to people’s health, and can kill. Adults

will read that message and can decide whether to take that course of action. It is not the role of Government to interfere in people's lives to that extent. They should not tell those people that they cannot buy something or cannot see the product that they want to buy.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. When I was speaking, I highlighted some of the facts that suggest that young people get hooked on cigarettes and that many of them are addicted by the age of 18 or 19. That is all part of a strategy.

The Member seems to believe in a free-for-all; that people can do whatever they like when they are over the age of 18. He seems to think that when people reach that age, they are adults and can make up their own minds, and can decide for themselves whether they want to drink too much, smoke too much, or whatever. Consider the statistics and the health inequalities that desperately need to be addressed. Thankfully, the Minister is beginning to get to grips with those matters by setting up a public health agency. The Member's colleague Mr Easton mentioned that the DUP was not opposed to that proposal, but the DUP was opposed to the establishment of an independent public health agency. It wanted the agency to be stuck in a corner with something else.

That is exactly the type of agency that will shine a light and put a focus on public health. *[Interruption.]*

The Member may not care much about that issue. I was very generous with my time to Mr Ross. This is about preventing people from getting hooked on cigarettes early. As other people have said — even the Member's party colleague — it is about intervening early and stopping advertising at the point of sale.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That was a very long intervention, Mr McCallister. Members should not abuse the courtesy shown to them, and I remind the House that interventions should be as brief and to the point as possible.

4.00 pm

Mrs Hanna: Will the Member give way? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ross: I agree with you totally, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not mind giving way to the Member, but I ask her to be brief. I will give way in just a minute, but, first, I want to address two of the issues that have been raised.

Mr McCallister again talked about protecting young people, but that is not an issue. Of course I do not want young people to take up smoking. That is why I supported measures proposed in the House to raise the smoking age limit to 18, and why I supported stronger enforcement against retailers who break that law or individuals who buy tobacco for young people.

As regards whether adults should be able to do what they like, as long as they are not breaking the law

adults should be able to make those decisions for themselves, because I believe in individuals having that freedom.

Mrs Hanna: Thank you for giving way; I will be brief. I am very concerned about the direction in which the Member's contribution is headed. The suggestion seems to be that we should not try to influence people over the age of 18 to look after their health and that we should not show them leadership. As a member of the Health Committee and a health professional, why would I not encourage and advise people not to take up smoking? Also, a person can be over the age of 18 but still be very young, and many are easily influenced by advertising. We must take that into account, as well.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ross: I am not saying that we should not encourage people to be healthy and to give up smoking; rather, I am saying that, as a Government, we should not ban people from making a decision that is ultimately their own.

I want to make some progress here. We must look at the evidence that supports the specific proposal about banning the display of cigarettes. I have heard Members say today that banning those displays would reduce the number of smoking-related deaths or the number of young people who start smoking. If that were the case, I would be happy to support the proposal, but I must say that I question whether those proposals will achieve that aim.

As I have already said, cigarettes should not be sold to children. That is already the case, and I have talked about increased enforcement of ID schemes and the need for stronger enforcement measures against those who purchase cigarettes for children. However, let us consider examples from across the world. New Zealand, for example, is recognised as having some of the strictest anti-tobacco laws anywhere in the world, but its Parliament has said that legislation to ban the display of cigarettes would make absolutely no difference.

The Minister talked about Iceland. However, the display of cigarettes has been banned in Canada and Iceland, and there has been no reduction in the amount of cigarettes sold there. I think that the Minister also mentioned the 15-year-old and 16-year-olds who would stop smoking, but it is illegal for them to smoke anyhow. If we are taking the existing law seriously, then 16-year-olds, and, under the new law, 17-year-olds, will not be able to smoke and should not be buying cigarettes. As I said, neither Canada nor Iceland has seen a reduction in the overall number of people who smoke.

However, the evidence shows the impact of such a ban on retailers; we have heard about the million of pounds that it will cost them. When proposing legislation that tries to achieve a certain desired outcome, we must be careful about the unintended

consequences — in this case, that may well mean damage to the retail sector in Northern Ireland. I am not sure that the case has been sufficiently made that banning the display of cigarettes would improve the health of everybody in the country. I would naturally resist anything that places an additional burden on small shops without having that evidence in front of me.

I also find it interesting that both the Conservative Party — with which the Ulster Unionist Party has now joined up — and the Liberal Democrats have stated that if they were in power, they would reverse this legislation. I wonder how the Minister can square his position with the fact that his new partners would reverse the legislation if they came into power.

That said, I support continuing efforts to educate people about the dangers of smoking. As I said, I certainly support the proposal to ban vending machines, because it is a practical measure that can make a real difference. I would also support the banning of 10-packs of cigarettes, which, again, are more commonly bought by young people. That is important. We should continue our efforts to ensure that children do not start smoking, are not sold cigarettes and do not get other people to buy cigarettes for them. However, I remain unconvinced about some aspects of the proposals being outlined today. I look forward to hearing the Minister address some of those concerns in his closing remarks.

Mr B McCrea: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. That fact will become relevant later, when I talk about the risks to young people.

I am fundamentally, absolutely and completely opposed to smoking. I am opposed to it because it kills people, it is addictive, and the costs to the National Health Service and to every taxpayer in this country are tremendous. I know that there are people in this place who make their living out of tobacco, but I cannot countenance its continued sale.

The question is sometimes asked as to whether smokers should even be treated in hospitals. The answer, of course, is that they must be treated, because humanity dictates that they are. Many of those people are addicted, and they became addicted when they were young and did not know about the implications of smoking. Therefore, we must help them. However, any proposals that we can introduce now to prevent people from becoming addicted, or to help them to give up this evil, should be supported.

I support Carmel Hanna's statement. However, I am completely confused by the ambivalence shown by the party to my left. On the one hand, Members from that party say that they support the proposals, that they are against smoking, and that they do not want to kill people, but, on the other hand, they trot out the line

that by the way, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats think that the display of cigarettes is OK.

If people are opposed to the display ban, they are opposed to it, and they should oppose it on principle. We are opposed to it on principle. It is not that we want retailers to be destitute — and we will look at that issue. At the same time, we do not want people who work in the industry to be thrown out on the street. We must also work on that matter. However, as other Members pointed out, the real costs of smoking are picked up by our society and by our National Health Service.

If I were asked, I would say that three major challenges face us: smoking; alcohol abuse in minors; and obesity. As politicians, we must start to show leadership. If there is a bank of cigarettes behind every shopping till, it sends out a message that smoking is socially acceptable. People talk nonsense when they say that smoking is illegal for people who are under 18, but when did that ever stop people who are under 18 from getting hold of that product? That is why we want to get rid of vending machines. Although they account for only 1% of sales, many young people buy their cigarettes from them.

Mr Ross: The Member will have heard me argue that I support that element of the proposals, because I understand how it will stop young people from buying cigarettes. However, I questioned how banning the display of cigarettes will prevent young people from getting hold of them, because they are getting hold of them illegally anyway and will continue to do so. What is proposed will impact negatively on retailers.

Mr B McCrea: I have tried to make this point several times. There is a multitude of things that we are trying to sort out, one of which is that people who wish to give up smoking should be given every assistance to do so, and putting temptation in their way is not helpful. I assure the Member that if sweets or crisps were no longer sold —

Ms S Ramsey: The Member mentioned earlier that he had 10 years' experience working for Mars confectionery. The key issue is about advertising and whether it is formal, professional or psychological advertising. Therefore, it might be useful for the debate if the Member could give us some trade secrets about how millions of pounds were spent by the company that he previously worked for to sell its products.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for giving me that opportunity, and I will do just that. Not only was I in the business of selling confectionery, but I had some connection with the tobacco trade — with Philip Morris and Marlboro. Members will recall that when the ban on advertising tobacco was introduced, large posters were erected that did not contain any advertising

— they merely had one block colour, and at the bottom of the poster, it stated that the product would kill you.

Later, companies started to try to put advertising on shop fascias, in the same way as the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ and the ‘News Letter’ do, because they know that point of presence works. Therefore, when one gets into all those issues, the simple fact is that what sells most products is ease of access and availability.

That is why, if we believe that it is socially irresponsible to push a product that kills people, ruins lives and costs us a fortune, we should take every step to ban its display.

I hope that the Minister does more: I hope that he intervenes earlier than he has said he will, and I hope that he introduces legislation to regulate the selling of tobacco in the same way that we regulate sales of alcohol. It has exactly the same effect. Our young people —

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Member for giving way, and I have no wish to cut him off in full stream.

However, the Member mentioned his membership of the Policing Board, and I, too, am a member of that board. The facts are as follows: 56% of all tobacco consumed in Northern Ireland has no duty paid on it. In other words, it is bought illegally. That is true of 33% of the cigarettes that are smoked in Northern Ireland — one in three. They are not bought from a retailer or vendor, but are either bought illegally and smuggled into the country, or bought abroad and brought back into the country. The advertising ban will not affect 56% of the tobacco sales in Northern Ireland and will not affect one in every three cigarettes smoked in Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: The corollary of that is that 44% of all sales will be affected, and that is a worthwhile target. The Member talks of illegal sales and paramilitary involvement. If I had my way, I would make smoking illegal. It is detrimental to people: it is not right that the Health Service has to pick up the cost of it.

However, as others have pointed out, this is a democracy. We live in the free world, where, if one drives things underground, one ends up with worse problems. On that basis, I am prepared to let the sale of tobacco go ahead. It is against my better judgement: I advise people not to buy it. That is the way it has to be. We cannot make it illegal. However, I see no reason why it should be encouraged, and that is what point-of-purchase advertising does. Temptation is put in front of people, and even those who want to give up tobacco cannot do so because it is put immediately before them.

Frankly, I am really disappointed in the ambivalence that Members show on this issue in the face of tragedy. One hears of the deaths of young people, 30- to 40-year-olds and young mothers. Had Members attended Ulster

Cancer Foundation events, they would have heard about the tragic circumstances of young people who have lost their mothers or fathers. That we cannot countenance.

There may be financial loss. A Member asked who pays for tobacco stands. It is a long time since I had any involvement in the industry, but, in my time, they cost about £1,000, and the tobacco companies — not retailers — paid for them.

Retailers may lose sales and profit. However, when I worked in that sector, I was told that tobacco and newspapers were demand-led — people came into the shop and asked for them. So what is the loss? If there is compensation to be paid, we should be happy to pay it. The long-term savings to society are greater. Perhaps we should consider reducing the rateable value of small corner shops or, as my honourable friend Mr Beggs suggested, making corner shops and convenience stores genuinely competitive. However, we should not force them to make a living out of peddling things that kill people and ruin our young people’s lives. The evidence exists, and it is simply incontestable. We must stand up and be counted on this issue.

Mr Paisley Jnr introduced me to folk who represented the tobacco industry: I am sorry for them. However, I cannot countenance anything that involves selling tobacco, encourages its use among young people, or prevents people from giving it up. We should give real leadership on this issue, as Carmel Hanna said.

I thank the Minister for bringing this legislation to the House, and I ask him to expedite it with all possible speed and to engage by all means with retailers and the industry to find the best way of removing the spectre of tobacco from society.

4.15 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: I resent it when a Minister comes to the House and presents an argument for something on an almost entirely emotional basis, and produces no evidence to support his argument. I would be quite happy to look at the evidence, and go through it line by line. However, when the argument to promote that action is purely an emotional one based on saying: look at this, children, and it kills you; look at this packet, and it will murder you; when it is produced —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is a visual aid, which is not allowed in the Chamber, particularly given the product, I would have thought.

Mr Paisley Jnr: When the argument is presented in such terms — look at this and you die — and has no bearing whatsoever on the reality of what happens, I think that that is wrong. There is an attempt, for a host of reasons, to blackmail Members emotionally into supporting the motion for that reason alone. My party has demonstrated, and said on the record — as have members of the Health Committee — that it will support

legislation and action, but not on an emotionally charged, or a blackmail-charged, basis.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

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

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will in one moment when I have made the point. I am happy to give way to you. We have plenty of time and I intend to use it.

I resent that blackmail allegation. I think that Members should resist it, and should not support the motion on that basis. If Members are going to support the motion, support it for proper reasons and not for the emotional reason.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. If the Member accepts that it is right to introduce this ban by 2013, and if it is right to do it then, why is not right to do so as soon as possible?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will come to that, because it forms part of my speech, and, indeed, part of the question that I want to put to the Minister, which I hope that he will be able to answer.

Let us put the issue of emotion to the side, and let us address the facts. For several years, Government have tried, in a number of ways, to influence people's consumption of tobacco. First, they taxed the product — and they have taxed it almost to death. What has happened as a result of that taxation? Consumption has remained the same or has increased. Secondly, the Government also banned the advertising of cigarettes and of the product. What has happened as a result? Has consumption collapsed or gone down? No; consumption has remained the same, at best, or has increased. Therefore, Government efforts to address the issue of consumption by the whip hand and by the hand of pressure have, quite frankly, failed.

Not so long ago, I asked the Minister a parliamentary question: did the higher rates of taxation cause anyone to suggest that they wanted to give up smoking? The Minister, quite truthfully, answered “no”.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: In a moment. People's attitudes towards consumption were not affected if they were overtaxed

Mr B McCrea: Following the Member's argument, is he advocating the legalisation of cannabis and other drugs, which are equally harmful and also addictive? In fact, tobacco is more addictive, and that might be part of the reason that people have not given up. Is he advocating the legalisation of cannabis, because, surely, if people are going to smoke cannabis anyway, we might as well tax it?

Mr Paisley Jnr: There we have the irrational, emotional argument: oh, if you are going to encourage people to smoke, you therefore want to encourage

them to murder. It really does not do the Member any justice whatsoever to make that case. In fact, some might wonder what mind-expanding substances he is on outside the Chamber when he comes in to use those sorts of arguments in here. Quite frankly, it does him no justice whatsoever.

Let us turn to the real point. The Department gives us the argument that has been made by the Member for Strangford Kieran McCarthy. He said that he wanted to see a policy based on:

“out of sight and out of mind”.

If that is the basis on which the House is to legislate, we are kidding ourselves that we can put things out of sight and everything will be all right. It has been demonstrated that none of the measures that the Government have taken — whether high taxation, the banning of advertising or the banning of the public display of advertising outside shops — have affected consumption. The little measure of making cigarettes invisible inside shops will not suddenly address the consumption issue. It will not actually work.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will give way in a minute.

There are issues towards which the Government should direct their attention in order to address consumption. I am opposed to smoking; I do not want my children to smoke. If I thought for one moment that one of my children would take up smoking as a result of my taking a different view on the proposed legislative action, I would not take that position. I take a realistic approach to the matter. There are four measures that the Government could take, some of which have been mentioned by my colleagues.

First, greater resources and manpower ought to be made available for an effective, targeted enforcement strategy by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Some of the tax money that is raised from tobacco should be ploughed into manpower along the border in order to prevent the illegal smuggling of those goods into the country.

The people who really benefit from such policies as higher taxation and bans on advertising happen to be the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. I know that it is not the Member's intention, so I will not accuse his party of wanting to encourage the paramilitaries — that would be wrong. However, these actions will have a consequence. Paramilitaries and other people who are involved in the illegal tobacco trade will be quite happy to thank Members for what they are doing.

Instead of people buying cigarettes from shops, where they will not see that product, the paramilitaries will be able to go around housing estates in Newtownards, Belfast, Ballymena and all over the Province and illegally distribute cigarettes to children and make

money themselves. Believe me — it will not make any difference whether they are under 18 or not.

Mr B McCrea: The Member has made the argument regarding paramilitaries to me previously. However, much to my disappointment, my party does not advocate making tobacco illegal. We are trying to decrease the propensity for it to be sold on an impulse basis, which is what the point-of-purchase argument is about. In particular, we are trying to prevent young people from getting access to tobacco, because, as Mr Shannon and others said, 75% of people who currently smoke started when they were teenagers. It appears that the Member's argument is that he is happy enough for tobacco to be sold as long as the Government get the taxes.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member misses the point. The measures that are proposed do not affect and impact on consumption. I have no doubt that the measures are well intentioned, but if they do not affect the consumption rate, they will not have the impact that we are telling the people of Northern Ireland, through the House, that they are going to have. If it takes someone to say that the emperor has no clothes on, I will say it.

Let us introduce measures that work. One of those should be to direct money to HMRC manpower. Another measure that would work would be to put money into and reinforce retail access prevention measures. In other words: no identity, no sale. Another measure that would work would be to punish and criminalise people who proxy-buy. I would far rather that people who buy cigarettes and give them to children be criminalised and punished. Those are the sorts of real actions that the House should take.

Mr B McCrea: Those are additional actions.

Mr Paisley Jnr: They are not additional actions. Those actions will make the difference, instead of pandering to a particular lobby to be PC or to be seen to do something. It is far worse to pretend to do something when that has no effect at all than to at least try to do something. We should try to do something that really will change the lives of people, as opposed to pretending that this measure will sort out the consumption issue. In years to come, we will be back in the House to say that another measure and another step are needed. Those steps have not worked.

A great deal of ignorance has been evident in what has been said about cigarette consumption; some of which has also appeared in the press. On 'The Nolan Show' this morning a Member said that the Bill would stop advertisement and display of tobacco products outside retail premises; such advertisements were banned long ago. Another said that the Bill would cut smoking rates; however, there is absolutely no evidence from anywhere in the world that it will have any effect on cutting smoking rates. Another said that

it will stop the display of tobacco advertisements on shop windows; that has not been allowed for 10 years. Someone else said that it will save lives. Frankly, the jury is still out on that claim. Looking at a product will neither change nor save your life.

The argument has also been made that vending machines should be banned outright. The fact is that in the Province most vending machines are located in licensed premises. A 10-year-old should not be in licensed premises where he or she would be able to obtain cigarettes from a vending machine. If people fail to police that, that is a problem for someone else. That issue ought to be dealt with.

The first point on which I gave way to the Member for South Down relates to when the Minister intends to put the legislation in place. Members can have different views and arguments about where the House should be on that point. However, I want the Minister to make it absolutely clear when exactly he intends to introduce the legislation. I have listened to him carefully: he said that it may be introduced after July 2010. Introducing the legislation before the rest of the United Kingdom — to gild the lily — will not have any greater impact than to allow retail premises in Northern Ireland to take their time, save money, and put in place the necessary changes that all other retail premises in the United Kingdom will have until 2013 to put in place.

I ask the Minister to assure the House that he will not press the start button on the legislation until it is ready to run in the rest of the United Kingdom. In another place, he can ask his colleagues and members of his party who sit in the House of Lords and the House of Commons to argue for that date to be brought forward if he so desires. However, the Assembly must not disadvantage the several thousand retailers in Northern Ireland who, between them, will have to spend more £15 million in modifying their shops to comply with the legislation.

I appeal to the Minister not to introduce the legislation before the rest of the United Kingdom but to do so simultaneously so that devolution is not seen as a disadvantage to those businesses. The economic argument that I make is simple: for the past year, all that Members have heard in the House is talk of the credit crunch and the pressure that it has put on people's pockets. The Assembly must not allow the Bill to apply additional pressure on people.

In a similar vein, I also ask the Minister to go to the kernel of the argument and to confirm to the House that he will not have to come back to the Assembly to press the start button on that piece of legislation but that it will be the Executive's decision; they will have to agree when it is introduced. If that is the case, will the Minister at least allow the Executive to make that decision on the basis of all the reasons behind the Bill,

which has hugely significant financial implications for our country?

It would be remiss of me not to mention the significant employer in my constituency. The fact that Gallaher/JTI is based in my constituency and employs approximately 1,000 people is incredibly important. That was dismissed by the Minister who said that the company exports most of its produce. Thank goodness that it does: Northern Ireland must export its manufactured goods. The company injects about £27 million in employees' wage packets into the local economy, throughout County Antrim and Belfast.

It would be remiss of the House not to recognise that swift and certain action that penalises the producer and the retailer will have a consequence on the product, which could, ultimately, result in that product being made elsewhere. It will still be smoked here. Consumption rates will remain the same, but cigarettes will be made elsewhere and imported to the country. Therefore, jobs in Northern Ireland will be lost.

I know that Members do not want to hear that fact, and some people think that it does not matter. In Northern Ireland's current economic cycle, it matters and is very important.

4.30 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I want to finish the point.

Therefore, the Minister should ensure that his actions do not jeopardise manufacturing or retail jobs in Northern Ireland in any way.

Mrs Hanna: Does the Member agree that the creation of smoke-free workplaces has raised awareness of the dangers of smoking and passive smoking? Does he agree that displaying tobacco products normalises those products, and, although looking at a product will not save a life or kill anyone, influencing somebody not to use a product that kills could save a life?

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member's point highlights a number of issues. Almost one third of a cigarette packet is used to state that smoking is fatal. If people want to smoke, it is up to them and is their free choice.

During the debate, we have heard arguments about the position in the rest of the world. New Zealand's Prime Minister recently announced his Government's decision to remove a similar piece of legislation to this Bill. Talking about the proposed display ban, John Key told a television station:

"The reason is there is no international evidence that it actually works, and it's hugely expensive to do it. I don't support at this time to change from the current situation."

It was not the right time, because the economic credit crunch affects New Zealand as well as Northern Ireland.

I ask the Minister, when he responds to the debate, to provide some comfort that he will introduce the legislation only in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. Moreover, I urge him to ensure that jobs in Northern Ireland are protected and that the legislation is introduced with the Executive's approval.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We should view the debate in the context and atmosphere of employment pressures. I am totally opposed to smoking. I smoked one cigarette, and, unlike Mr Shannon, I was not green — I was red, white and blue. I never smoked another cigarette.

I want to respond to some remarks that have been made during the debate. One cannot compel people to take the road that you think that they should take. They must be converted to that view, and only conversion will remove what is damaging them. We should keep that in mind. I am not saying that if I had my way, I would wipe them all out. I am saying that I want to convert them to the opinion that has been offered by almost all Members — that we condemn smoking.

My son spoke at length, and I agree with his comments. Furthermore, I agree that we need to examine carefully matters that will affect people who want to work in Ulster. That must be done in such a way that does not put greater pressure on people. That is all-important.

I listened carefully to the Minister's remarks, and I hope that he will answer some of the questions that have been put to him. I will certainly be voting for the motion tonight, as will my colleagues; I do not think that any of them will be against it.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is going to talk to those people who are worrying about their own employment position. I trust that he will also meet with representatives from Gallaher in my constituency, and I hope that he will consider carefully what he should do about those matters. He should not just have a general meeting, which is what I know that some members of the Westminster Government do — they bring in a crowd of people, have a happy time and leave, but two days later those people find that they might as well not have been there.

I have been travelling to London with representatives of Gallaher every year for a very long time. Those representatives, who are in the Public Gallery tonight, were not at the first meeting, but I was, and we had wonderful talks with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, we got nothing done. I hope that the Minister will meet those people, listen to them, realise that that they wish to make a point, and take that into consideration as he makes his final decision.

I would also like the assurance that, whatever the Executive do about the matter when the Minister brings it to them, the final say will be in the Assembly and

that the Assembly will be entitled to say aye or no to the final settlement.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am grateful to the Members who spoke. The debate was long, and a number of important points was made. The general tenor of the comments that were made indicates that the House supports the legislation.

On that point, I will begin by outlining the situation as it now stands. I was asked whether I needed to go back to the Executive for a decision. The answer is no. The Executive decision has already been sought and agreed. I have agreed to provide a paper for the Executive, a consultation on regulations, and a commencement date. Those are the issues with which I must return to the Executive. That follows the process that was agreed at the Executive Committee meeting that was held on 15 January.

The Executive agreed to a number of points in the proposal. First, subject to timing and identification of acceptance, we should move to a position where the display of tobacco at point of sale is banned in Northern Ireland; secondly, the Department of Health should take further powers to ban or restrict the sale of tobacco through vending machines; thirdly, the necessary legislative cover for those changes should be advanced in the Westminster Health Bill [HL], which is due for introduction in the new parliamentary session; and finally, the Assembly's agreement should be obtained in due course by means of a legislative consent motion. That is the reason that we are here today.

I have heard Members say overwhelmingly that they support the legislation, although there is an argument about timing. I will try to address some of the points that were raised. Mr Paisley Jnr said that the consumption of tobacco has remained the same or has increased. That is not, in fact, true. Consumption of tobacco has actually decreased over the past number of years, specifically since the introduction of the ban on consumption in public places. In 2007, 25% of adults were smoking, but that figure has now reduced to 23%. There has been a steady reduction, but there remains a hard core from a generation ago of people who are now in their 30s.

Mr Ross said that no evidence was available, but, in fact, there is clear evidence from Canada and Iceland that shows that there has been a reduction of between 30% and 40% in the prevalence of people under 18 who smoke following the introduction of bans on tobacco advertising displays at point of sale.

Basil McCrea said that display stands at point of sale cost the tobacco companies approximately £1,000 to produce. However, those displays are renewed routinely; the tobacco companies spend that money and distribute the displays free of charge, because they aid sales and promotion of the product. Tobacco

advertising has a strong effect on young people; 11- to 16-year-olds are the target audience. Mr Ross said that it was illegal for people under 18 to smoke, so they should not be doing it. Well, listen — welcome to the real world. That actually happens, Mr Ross. You talk about not wanting a nanny state; well, your nanny must have been very careful with you, because you are divorced from the world that most of us live in.

Of the 150,000 young people between 11 and 16 years of age in Northern Ireland, some 9% — 13,500 young people — smoke. If we could achieve the 30% reduction that has been achieved in Canada, it will mean that 4,000 young people will be prevented from taking up smoking. If we were to achieve the sort of change that has been achieved in Iceland — a 40% reduction — 5,000 young people will be prevented from taking up smoking. As Mr Gardiner said, the onset of cancer is three times more likely among those who take up smoking as a teenager than it is among those who start smoking in their 20s. That is another reason why these measures are so crucial.

I am concerned about those issues, and that is why I have had to consider the element of timing. The longer we put this ban off, the more likely it will be that we will lose young people to the corrosive practice of smoking. I started smoking when I was a teenager, as did Sue Ramsey and Kieran McCarthy, and I found it very difficult to stop. Ian Paisley Jnr and others preach about smoking. I assume that as a son of the manse, he never smoked, but he is talking about something that he knows nothing about. To try to give up smoking after taking it up as a teenager is a very difficult thing to do.

One of the key triggers in breaking one's resolve is to have to go into a shop to buy a packet of chewing gum or a bottle of milk, only to be confronted by a display filled with cigarettes. The temptation is to buy a packet, telling yourself that you will smoke one and throw the rest away. There is a strong addiction factor.

Our Health Service is looking after people who smoke and who pay the consequences in the form of cancers, coronaries and strokes. The key is to stop young people from ever starting to smoke. That is why I feel so strongly about the issue.

Mr Ross said that it was unfair not to display a legal product. Well, listen, Mr Ross: top shelf magazines are legal, but they are on the top shelf for a very good reason. Are you saying that, for example, nude magazines should be on display? By your logic, that is exactly what you are saying. You are saying that it is not up to Government to tell adults what to do —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister should make all his remarks through the Chair.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I will, of course, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Ross also said that it is not up to Government to tell adults what to do. Well, listen: people cannot just do what they want. That is why, for example, when I bring forward termination of pregnancy legislation, I will be telling adults what to do. That is important, and is something that the entire House will take an interest in. If I were to follow Mr Ross's logic, people could simply do what they want.

4.45 pm

Mr Ross: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No, I will not give way. Mr Ross has had more than ample chance to speak. As I told Mr Paisley Jnr, I am now trying to respond to all the points that Members raised. It is a similar situation with pornography laws — one cannot simply let adults do what they want. Governments must take a view and be prepared to intervene. That is why we have devolution — so that we can be different from, or the same as, other parts of the UK, and that is a matter for us to determine.

The Irish Republic will start the process of banning the display of tobacco products in shops on 1 July 2009. Retailers in England, Scotland and Wales will start that process in 2011, not 2013, and it is a process that Government say will take two years. I am concerned that it will take that length of time, because, as I said, we can intervene with our cohort — even if we only hit the Canadian figure of a reduction of 30% in the prevalence of people who smoke — and affect 4,000 young people, who will then never get hooked on the corrosive and damaging conveyer of smoking.

Carmel Hanna and other Members made the point about vending machines, and it is a point well made. Ian Paisley Jnr said that vending machines are on licensed premises; however, they are also in hotels. Generally, vending machines sit in corridors, in lobbies and in other places where under-18s can go. Under-18s can access cigarettes from vending machines. British Heart Foundation evidence says that roughly 1,500 young people in Northern Ireland regularly buy cigarettes from vending machines. That is a conservative estimate and is the reason why we must introduce this policy. Vending machines are not sitting safely in well policed areas — far from it.

Thomas Buchanan asked whether smoking had increased or decreased among people since the recent measures were introduced. As regards young people, I do not know the answer to that. Those measures were introduced in 2007, the same year in which the last Young Persons Behaviour and Attitudes Survey was conducted. That survey is conducted every three years, so we will not know the answer to Mr Buchanan's question until the next one is concluded. Evidence certainly shows that the measures have had an effect

on adults, although any evidence that I have is purely anecdotal.

In 2007-08 we spent £450,000 on cessation services, which has been a key factor in helping people to kick the habit.

Dr Paisley asked whether I was prepared to speak to and meet retailers, representatives, shops stewards and advisers. Of course I am, and I prepared to listen to what they have to say and to talk to them. I spent a lifetime in business, including retail, so I have some understanding of retailers' concerns. However, I cannot accept the argument that it will cost each corner-shop owner £5,000 to replace the free stands that a manufacturer supplies, nor do I accept the argument about a massive loss of business.

We are not saying that cigarettes cannot be sold in shops. We are simply saying that cigarettes must be removed from those large stands that sit behind cash registers, and instead be placed under the counter. People will be able to buy cigarettes from the same shop that they always have done. Most retailers say that cigarettes sales are a curse, because the profit margins for them are so small, and the value of the cigarettes is so high, that if a retailer loses one packet, he loses the profit from carton upon carton. Cigarettes are, in effect, loss leaders. People go to a service-station shop to pay for their tank of petrol and to buy a packet of cigarettes, and, once there, they are tempted into buying a newspaper and a Kit Kat.

My experience is that retailers sell cigarettes because everybody else sells cigarettes. Retailers think that if they do not sell cigarettes, they will be disadvantaged. However, retailers would be far better off if none of them sold cigarettes, because shops cannot make a profit from cigarettes, given that the profit margins are so small. Pilferage levels are also very high. Therefore, cigarettes are a difficult product with which to deal.

I am grateful for Members' support in the House on this issue. Mr Paisley Jnr spoke about Members making emotional arguments. However, he then proceeded to make an emotional argument about how it would cost £15 million to rectify shops and about how the Ballymena factory would close.

Even the Gallaher Group is not saying that or anything like it. Nor is the company talking about relocating. Most of the products produced by the Gallaher Group are exported.

I am not saying that we should ban cigarettes, but I am seeking to stop those young people who are most susceptible to the form of advertising that we are discussing from starting to smoke. That is what the proposals are about — stopping young people from starting to smoke. Everyone should support that, and one should consider opposing it, including those who say that they support the proposals but whose tenor is

opposition, as with Mr Ross. Mr Ross's comments were extremely disappointing — there spoke a non-smoker if ever there was one. He has no experience of a lot of things. *[Laughter.]*

I have said that I will talk to retailers and factory employees; Dr Paisley and other Members raised that point, and it is a matter of concern. The earliest that the measures can be introduced is July 2010, which is two financial years away for retailers and businesses. I would have thought that that is a reasonable period of time. I will carefully consider the suggestions about vending machines, because there is a strong argument for banning them.

I thank all Members, because, by and large, they made very positive contributions. I take heart from the support that I have had in the House and commend the legislative consent motion to the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Health Bill [HL] dealing with tobacco, and powers of suspension in relation to members of NHS bodies and other bodies concerned with health.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Assembly Commission Engagement Strategy

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Moutray: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Engagement Strategy developed by the Assembly Commission, which is aimed at improving public engagement with the Assembly, its committees and MLAs.

From the outset, I want to indicate that the remarks that I am making are on behalf of the Assembly Commission. I acknowledge the support of all members of the Assembly Commission in the development of the engagement strategy.

Today's debate marks the culmination of work undertaken by the Assembly Commission over the past year. The Commission has set out an ambitious vision of strengthening democracy and creating a better future for all. In order to achieve that vision, the Commission has set out a strategic priority to develop a dynamic and responsive strategy for outreach and public engagement. Put simply: engagement is the process of giving the public a voice and enabling them to contribute to the democratic process. The engagement strategy has now been approved by the Assembly Commission. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will Members please resume their seats?

Mr Moutray: However, it is both timely and appropriate to allow Members from all parties to contribute to the ongoing debate in wider society on the role of our democratic institutions. The Electoral Commission reported that turnout for Assembly elections has declined from almost 68% in 1998 to just over 53% in 2007. A recent survey found that over half of Northern Ireland adults believe:

“people have no say in what Government does.”

Less than one fifth of adults believe that they have a say in what Government do. The statistics are even worse when it comes to younger people: almost one quarter of 18- to 24-year-olds strongly agree with the statement:

“People like me have no say in what Government does.”

Given that this generation grew up during the most peaceful period of the past 40 years in Northern Ireland, the challenge of strengthening democracy and creating a better future for all cannot be underestimated.

Against that stark background, the Assembly has developed a clear, consistent and long-term strategy

for engaging with the general public. The Commission hopes that the strategy will lead to an increased awareness of the role of the Assembly and a strengthening of democracy. The Commission does not underestimate the magnitude of the challenge. Significant long-term investment is required to increase public understanding of the Assembly. The Puttnam Commission stated:

“The public have a right to expect a Parliament which reaches out to all citizens and invites participation and interaction.”

The improvement of public access to Parliament Buildings is a primary objective of the engagement strategy. However, the Assembly already finds it difficult to meet the existing demand for access, particularly to Committee meetings. As a democratically representative body, it must be desirable for the Assembly to create more public understanding of its role and to foster the sense that it welcomes all visitors, and it is already successful in the latter respect. Typically, Parliament Buildings hosts 40 schools, colleges and universities and approximately 1,100 students per month. In addition, it hosts approximately 140 tours and events attended by about 6,000 people each month.

However, the Commission is all too aware that more must be done. Educational visitors are the engagement strategy's priority, and awareness and understanding of the Assembly should begin at school. The Commission's aim is to give as many schoolchildren and young adults as possible an opportunity to visit the Assembly as part of the experience of learning about our democratic institutions and processes and how they work.

Mr Shannon: Is the Member aware of a special event taking place on the May Day bank holiday? On that Monday, schoolchildren and families of MLAs and Assembly staff are invited to a family fun day. Several Departments will be involved, and, given that the event is taking place on a bank holiday, the invitation will be open to even more people from outside the Assembly. They will be able to take advantage of the opportunity to see inside Parliament Buildings and to visit the grounds.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for his intervention. I was not aware of that event but, thanks to him, I and many others know about it now.

I am delighted to announce that the Commission will launch a subsidised travel scheme later this year. The scheme aims specifically to encourage children from schools in areas of social and geographical disadvantage to travel to Parliament Buildings. Such schemes already operate in Wales, Scotland and Westminster, and it is appropriate to introduce a similar scheme for the Assembly.

However, as learning about the work of the Assembly is not solely dependent on a visit to Parliament Buildings, the Commission is developing a Northern Ireland-wide programme of educational activity. Building on the

theme of education, the Assembly will focus on engaging with young people. A youth forum will be established to consider, debate and make recommendations on issues of particular importance to young people. The youth forum will culminate in an annual youth assembly, the outcome of which will be debated by MLAs in the House.

The Assembly is the most important political institution in Northern Ireland. It is important, therefore, that it equips the current generation of young people with the skills and experience that will allow them to play their part in future political life, whether as MLAs or public servants. Society can only benefit from young people having an insight into the way in which democracy works.

The Assembly is committed to giving young people an understanding of how the legislature works. I am delighted to announce that an innovative postgraduate bursary programme will be established that will lead to the award of a masters degree in legislative studies and practice. The new programme, the pilot of which will be launched on 24 March 2009, is the first masters degree of its kind, and it will benefit those who want to play their part in future political life, whether as MLAs or public servants. The bursary programme will provide participants with the opportunity to gain experience of working in core business areas of the Assembly. All Members would freely admit that, at times, politicians and the media do not make good bedfellows. However, in a democracy, the public has a right to understand what the Assembly does and why.

5.00 pm

The Power Inquiry concluded that the media — television, newspapers and radio — remains the single most important source of information that the public draws on for political news and information. The Commission understands fully that demonstrating how the Assembly considers issues and scrutinises legislation, in a way that suits the needs of the media, is key to maximising coverage of the business of the House.

The Commission is in the process of making changes to media access to Parliament Buildings in order to further improve the level of media coverage. Last year, the Assembly made a significant investment in upgrading its broadcasting facilities, and we will continue to build on that investment by ensuring that all Committee rooms have broadcasting equipment installed. In future, rather than having to travel to Parliament Buildings to visit a Committee, it will be possible to view and hear proceedings using the Internet.

It is impossible to ignore the rise of the Internet. It is also interesting that technologies that seemed to be innovative only a few weeks ago are being overtaken by new technologies. The Assembly website was first set up in 1998 and now has more than 20,000 pages of

content. That is a huge asset. However, the website has not kept pace with technological developments. As a result, the Commission is committed to investing in the complete redevelopment of the website over the next 18 months.

We have already piloted some innovations. Some Members have heard of services such as Twitter. In fact, some Members are already using it. The Assembly is piloting its own Twitter service, which the public can register for, and receive, regular “tweets”. For Members who think that I am making that up, check out www.twitter.com/niassembly. It is essential that the Assembly, as an institution, is seen to be wholly transparent. The new Assembly website, when developed, will provide members of the public with the ability to view plenary sessions and Committee meetings live or through a playback function.

Users will also be able to subscribe to automatic update services to notify them when changes have been made; for example, when a Committee report or Bill is published. The Internet will deliver much more. However, it is only a tool, and it cannot, and should not, replace face-to-face engagement between MLAs and their constituents. The Assembly is committed to engaging with the public and their local communities. A roadshow with the theme ‘Your Assembly Your Say’ will take place from 18 March to 7 April and will pass through nine towns and cities across Northern Ireland, from Ballymena to —

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

Mr Moutray: The roadshow will provide the public with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of how the different mechanisms, processes and structures of the Assembly operate.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé iontach sásta cead cainte a bheith agam ar an tairiscint seo inniu. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo. Ba mhaith liom i bhfabhar na tairisceana.

I welcome the take-note debate that has been outlined by fellow Commission member Stephen Moutray. I speak in favour of the motion. As Mr Moutray has outlined, the engagement strategy is trying to deal with the disconnection between the Assembly and the wider community.

There has been a decline in voter participation between 1998 and the last election in 2007, and there has been a particular decline among younger voters. That is why I think that the strategy will be particularly important in trying to address that issue. It will also address disadvantaged groups, some of whom are disadvantaged because of their geography, others because of their distance from the Assembly. I am talking about citizens and young people in schools.

There are people who are disadvantaged because of deprivation and social disadvantage. In particular, I welcome the fact that a travel scheme will be put in place in an attempt to deal with that problem.

Furthermore, attempts must be made to reach out to minorities, because the strategy will not work unless it engages with everyone in society. Obviously, the politics of the past mean that there is a legacy with Stormont. However, I am not just talking about problems in engaging with unionists, loyalists, nationalists and republicans. There are also problems with our engagement with, for example, ethnic minorities — people who have come to this country in the past few years. In addition, we must engage with older people, people with disabilities, young people and gay and lesbian people, and the strategy outlines how the Assembly can engage better with those groups over the next couple of years.

Although we say that the Assembly has a job in hand, if one examines the figures that Stephen Moutray mentioned, one discovers that in 2007, approximately 50,000 people visited Parliament Buildings, and a similar number visited in 2008, including 35,000 adults and almost 7,500 children on school visits. Furthermore, there are approximately 500,000 hits a month on the website, inquiring about Committees and the questions that Members have asked. Although we must not rest on our laurels, and we must ensure that the engagement strategy develops over the next couple of years, quite a few people are interested in visiting the Assembly and the website.

Stephen Moutray mentioned media access, about which there has been some criticism. I know that politicians do not always get on with the press, but there has been criticism of the media having access to here, having information, and having access to Committees. The website is also an issue: it has been in existence for quite a few years, and there are plans to try to update it.

There are two further crucial areas that must be considered. First, educational visits must be a priority for the engagement strategy, because young people make up the category that is most disconnected from politics and the Assembly. Secondly, emphasis must be placed on the work of Committees. Most Committees attempt to hold some meetings in various places in the community. For example, on Thursday, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment will be going to Derry. Nevertheless, it is important to implement the strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will Member draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Butler: Sin a bhfuil le rá agam, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ar son na tairisceana seo.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I, too, welcome the debate on the Assembly Commission's engagement strategy. As a member of every Assembly Commission since the establishment of the Assembly, I think that I can safely declare an interest.

The Assembly Commission has been developing the engagement strategy during the past year, and it is gratifying to know that we can bring it to the Floor of the Assembly today, even with so few Members in the Chamber.

Earlier today, Members discussed important matters, including the Budget Bill and the Financial Provisions Bill. Irrespective of political perspective, those matters, although they may be considered mundane, ultimately impact on the whole of society, and that is hugely significant, because all too often, the yah-boo of politics overshadows the enormous amount of constructive debate and good work that takes place in the House. However, that is not unique to this Assembly or to this country. It is a fact of life that in almost every democratic legislature in the world, the perceived distance between politicians and the public is growing, and although the engagement strategy is not a panacea for all our perceived institutional woes, it represents a good starting point from which to proceed.

Our economy is in recession, and now it is more timely than ever that all Members, as elected representatives, take the opportunity to let the public have its say. That is why the forthcoming Assembly roadshows are so important. I welcome the fact that the roadshow will visit Ballymena, as well as eight other venues across Northern Ireland.

I have seen a lot of changes in the past 10 years, particularly in how the relationship between the Assembly and the media has changed over time. It is fair to say that the Assembly has been less than welcoming to the media in the past, but this Commission appreciates fully the significant role that the media plays in communicating the work of the Assembly to the public.

Stephen Moutray, the honourable Member who introduced the debate, said that television, newspapers and radio remain the most important sources of information that the public draws upon for political news and information. That is why the Commission has recognised the important contribution that the media can make in communicating the work of the Assembly. That is a relationship of which all Members and parties need to be supportive.

Since the establishment of the Assembly in 1998, there have been times when I have been disappointed in the attitude of the media towards the Assembly. When I was studying for my media degree and doing a thesis on the relevance of existentialism to television, it became apparent — again and again — that too many

people in the media think only of the next programme, and many think that controversy, confrontation and sensationalism are all that matter in media expression.

The media must take under its wing the fact that it, too, has a responsibility in the community for the corporate knowledge that goes out from the Assembly. The Commission is not asking the media not to deal with those who overstep the line and who do something wrong; it is asking the media to partner the Assembly in the engagement strategy so that, together, we can take forward the programme and let the people see the good side of an Assembly that does so much for them.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome today's debate. It is important that the Assembly acknowledges that the Commission has initiated a debate, which is useful for Members to express their individual points of view, as opposed to party points of view, on the work that the Commission is doing and, in this instance, on engagement. It is important that the Commission and the Assembly involve themselves in engagement and outreach with the public.

The Electoral Commission has produced some disturbing figures. The turnout for the 1998 Assembly elections was 67·9%, but in 2007, that had dropped significantly to 53·3%. That is a huge drop of 15% in the number of voters participating in Assembly elections.

I am not saying that the engagement strategy will remedy that, but there is an obvious need for Members to engage with the public in order to improve the reputation of the House and to attract people to its work. The Assembly is an important democratic institution, and we worked hard to establish it. Therefore, it is important that all Members become involved in the work of engagement. The ultimate success story will be to make politics work in the Chamber.

If politics works in this House, more and more people in the general public will engage with the work of the Assembly.

5.15 pm

Of course, the Commission is not a party-political body — it is non-partisan and exists to assist with the more technical aspects of the work of the Assembly. Part of that involves enhancing our technological facilities, to assist people communicating with us and to help us to communicate with the public. A great deal of work has been done on that and a great deal of money will be invested in extending our website to make it more sophisticated and technologically advanced so that people can take advantage of the information that is available from the Assembly. That is a very important advance; however, as Mr Moutray said on behalf of the Commission, there are many other aspects of our work.

Mr Moutray referred in particular to the youth forum and the youth assembly. Encouraging young people to be interested in the mechanics, politics and general working of the Assembly is a vital part of our work. A further enhancement and attraction is the postgraduate bursary that will be available to university students, as it will allow them to work in Parliament Buildings and gain an academic qualification arising out of their participation in the work of the Assembly.

There are many ways that the engagement strategy will, in a very practical and measured way, engage with the public. It is important also that we enhance the facilities for the press and the media in this Building, so part of the strategy involves allowing greater access for the press. The strategy is a serious and sustained effort by the Commission, and it is fair to say that there was no disagreement in the Commission on it. The strategy has the collective force and authority of all the Commission members, and its aim is to engage with people throughout Northern Ireland.

As Mr Moutray suggested, it is important for all Members to engage in the roadshows that the Commission has organised, which will be happening over the next month or so. I encourage all Members to participate in them — as a member of the Commission, I will certainly do so where I can.

Mr Neeson: As a member of the Assembly Commission, I fully support the engagement strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is important to point out that this is the very first engagement strategy, and I consider it to be extremely important to the development of the Assembly as a whole. Given that there is greater certainty now about the future of devolution, it is vital that we develop an outreach programme at every level.

It is essential, if we are to succeed, that we give ownership of the Assembly to everyone in Northern Ireland. That is a major priority of the Assembly Commission, and it is for that reason that we have developed a series of Assembly roadshows that will allow people to understand how the Assembly works and, by the same token, will provide opportunities for MLAs to interact with local communities. As Alban Maginness said, it is a great opportunity in which MLAs can participate. Some MLAs expressed disappointment to me that a roadshow will not be appearing in their constituency, but I hope that all the constituencies of Northern Ireland will be covered before the end of this mandate.

I have been greatly impressed by the work of the Assembly's Education Service, and it seems that the number of schoolchildren visiting the Assembly is increasing. It is important to try to develop an interest among young people, not only in the work of the Assembly, but in political life. Hopefully, as other

Members have said, the engagement strategy will encourage more young people to vote when they come of age.

I welcome the establishment of the Youth Forum and the youth parliament. A number of years ago, I chaired a youth parliament on several occasions in Belfast City Hall, and that was hugely successful. There are great opportunities out there.

It is also encouraging to see Committees going out into the community and holding meetings outside Parliament Buildings. By the same token, as Stephen Moutray said, there is a need to improve facilities in Committee rooms in Parliament Buildings to make them more accessible and more user-friendly. A space audit is being carried out in Parliament Buildings, which aims to improve facilities for elected Members and members of the public.

As chairman of the Northern Ireland Assembly Business Trust, I am delighted with the good relations that have been developed between Members and the business community and, in particular, I wish to thank the Speaker for all his help and assistance. Last month, a Speaker's dinner was held in Parliament Buildings. It was hugely successful and, since then, we have enlisted new members from the business community.

Other Members have referred to the relationship with the media — it is important to develop good relations. The fact that quite a large number of people watch 'Stormont Live' on Mondays and Tuesdays goes to show the importance of developing good relations with the media.

Finally, if devolution is going to work and be a success, it must be open and transparent and fully accountable to the people of Northern Ireland, and that is what the engagement strategy is all about.

Mr Ross: I thank the Assembly Commission for tabling the motion. Engagement with the public is extremely important. As individual MLAs, and as political parties, we should already be engaging with our constituents. I run weekly surgeries in my offices and attend group meetings. I also run personal websites and get involved with other community organisations. The onus may, therefore, be on individual Members to engage with the public. It is disappointing that more Members did not come to listen or participate in the debate on engagement.

My party is embracing new technology. Mr Moutray talked about emerging technology such as Twitter. Of course, there is also Flickr, YouTube and others, which are important in reaching new and younger people who are more au fait with such technology than some Members. As a relatively new body, the Assembly must do the same. I encourage people to engage with this body and to improve their understanding of what goes on in the Committees, the Executive and the

Assembly. Greater interaction between the legislature and the people whom we represent can only strengthen democracy and be a good thing.

People are, generally, interested in what goes on at Stormont. As has been mentioned, there are tours of the Building every day. We meet groups of people, students and schoolchildren almost weekly, and I meet a number of school parties through the Education Service. I agree with Mr Neeson's comments about it being a good service, and we must commend the good job that its staff do under somewhat cramped conditions.

It is important to get young people involved in politics, and every Member to speak so far has said so. Young people should understand that the decisions that are taken here impact on their lives, and will in the future.

For that reason, it is encouraging to see so many groups from schools and universities coming to Parliament Buildings. They are keen and eager to learn more about the political process, and that is a good thing. The report from the Commission referred to a purpose-built education suite, which is very important and is a positive and welcome recommendation of the engagement strategy. Such a suite will assist in teaching young people and university groups about devolution. It is also important that teachers and lecturers are kept up to speed with events, and the suite will host seminars, from which lessons and information can be passed on.

Engaging with young people on all levels is important. Members have heard about the Youth Forum, which is an interesting concept. I was here last year for the Youth Forum debate held in this Chamber. That was a useful tool for young people, and it was very encouraging to hear such strong opinions about issues affecting the people taking part. The interns programme referred to in the strategy is also useful. I have met interns who are at the Assembly at the moment. They have an opportunity to work with parties, MLAs, in the Bill Office and in other aspects of Government.

It must be recognised that most people cannot get to Stormont during the day, and they may get only a snippet of what goes on here in the news at home in the evening or in newspapers. As Mr Moutray said, we should be improving the media output by improving live streaming from the Chamber, and, indeed, from Committee rooms. That means that people who are interested — or school groups and their schools — will be able to watch proceedings live and gain a greater understanding of what we do.

Posting videos or snippets of Members' speeches online may be other ways to be considered. Mr Moutray also talked about Twitter, which may be useful, and may enable people who are following debates to get a snapshot of what is going on.

Mr Weir: Perhaps we could look at getting a special DVD of the best speeches. Perhaps that would be a top Christmas seller.

Mr Ross: I am not quite sure that it would be a top seller, but I think that it would be useful for people to get a snippet of what happened on a given day on issues in which they have an interest. It is something that we must look at.

Another way of engaging is through the all-party groups. In addition, the Assembly Committees meet with the voluntary and community sector all the time, and it is important that voluntary and community groups have the opportunity to come to Stormont to give evidence.

I have heard in the debate about Committees interacting. As a member of the Environment Committee, I know that on a number of occasions that Committee has gone to places such as the Giant's Causeway, Armagh and Castlewellan in order to conduct its business. That is a way of taking Assembly proceedings to the public. More people can access us and we are seen out and about, which is something that must continue.

Finally, it has not yet been mentioned in the debate, but I notice the inclusion of e-petitions in the strategy. E-petitions have been very successful, particularly in Downing Street. I have been lobbied on a number of occasions by constituents who want me to sign up to a Downing Street petition, whether on the recent Eames/Bradley recommendations or on other issues. It would be an important way for the public to register their concerns and comments to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Ross: Therefore, I welcome the Commission's efforts in drawing up the engagement strategy, and I look forward to some of its proposals being rolled out over the coming months.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In quite a number of debates, Members have been twittering without realising it.

Ms S Ramsey: The Member had an intervention. I will probably take his extra minute and, hopefully, I will not twitter through it. Like all the Members who have spoken, I broadly welcome that the Assembly, as an institution, is engaging with the community. I do not wish to be the fly in the ointment, but there are some issues that I want to raise in the debate. I would appreciate answers today, but if not, perhaps I will get them in time.

As most Members have said, the engagement strategy was published just a few weeks ago. That was the first time that most Members — if not all — got to see it. We are told that the strategy is now part of a public consultation. I would appreciate some information on that. Is it the standard public consultation? How long

will it take? To whom has the consultation paper been sent? Has it been sent to the section 75 groupings? Are the roadshows part of the public consultation? If not, are we jumping before we actually consult on a document that the Assembly has sent out?

I agree with the Speaker's comments in his press release, in which he said that he was:

"looking forward to going into the community with the Roadshows and speaking with local people".

I agree with the Speaker. As someone who has a background in local government, I see the value of reaching out to local people and their communities. Alastair Ross touched on the fact that that is something that we do, for example, through our constituency services and constituency meetings.

5.30 pm

A key question, and an issue that has been mentioned, is who chose the venues, the times and the format of the roadshows. If answers can be given today that there will be additional roadshows, then so be it; we should be given that information. I am quite concerned that there will be only eight or nine venues.

We talk about engaging with all sectors of society, so we should genuinely engage with those who are most likely to be marginalised. How do we expect elderly people from North Belfast or a person with a disability from West Belfast to get to The Baby Grand? Is that genuinely targeting those who are most marginalised from the Assembly?

I do not want to come across as being very critical of the strategy, however. If there are answers to our questions, let us know. We should be acting as a conduit, but we need to send out a clear message.

Bob Coulter mentioned that he was a member of all the previous Commissions. Their outreach attempts did not work, so we should not assume that the same venues will work now. We need to propose new venues and talk to —

Mr Neeson: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: Yes — briefly.

Mr Neeson: Does the Member agree that it is important that the roadshows are scheduled to go to every part of Northern Ireland — north, south, east and west — and that that should be an important part of the strategy?

Ms S Ramsey: I absolutely agree. We need to be told about it now, because we, as MLAs, will be selling the engagement strategy as much as members of the Commission. If we are genuinely going to engage, let us talk to the community groups and organisations, the farming and fishing communities, the Irish language groups, and the Ulster-Scots society, but we should be told. It should not be a matter of the Commission

versus the Assembly. The Assembly, collectively, should go out and give information to the people. I accept that there should be additional roadshows, and we should be told about them as quickly as possible.

I do not think that anybody could fault the work that is being done by the Assembly's Education Service. I accept that its staff work in cramped conditions and with resources that are not up to date or up to standard. However, I want to know whether its forward work plan will target areas of disadvantage. Will it target areas of geographical and social disadvantage? I want to know who it will target in my constituency.

If we welcome the strategy, we must consider this place itself. As Sean Neeson mentioned earlier, we need to give ownership of all of this to the people. There is a history to this place. If we are to succeed in really engaging with people, we need to consider the fact that the Assembly website is not bilingual. We also must examine the flags and emblems in this place. The Commission has not made any attempt to implement the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

If we are sincere about outreach, the Commission should engage with people in my constituency and in others. If we are talking about being genuinely involved in getting schools and young people up here, is there an Irish-language officer in the Education Service who could give tours? If there is not, the strategy is not for all the people from the outset. If thousands upon thousands of pounds will be spent on the engagement strategy, we, as MLAs, should know the details from the outset.

The idea of MLAs using their constituency offices to engage with people is absolutely right. However, if we want to send out printed-paper documents, we find it hard to send out information through the free-post service as it is, because circulars tell us that we cannot do certain things. If the Commission gives us information to send out, where does that sit in relation to our providing financial information about our affairs? That issue must be cleared up.

I agree that the all-party groups need to be properly resourced.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw her remarks to a close.

Ms S Ramsey: However, if we are talking about engaging, we must openly and actively engage across the board.

Mr Attwood: From what I have heard during this debate, it is self-evident that we all should agree on a strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly to engage with the wider community — not least because the fortunes of this Assembly have ebbed and flowed since 1998; not just during the days of suspension, but even last autumn, during the days of no Executive meetings.

Therefore, I welcome the document in that it establishes the principle of community engagement. However, like Sue Ramsey, I want to put on record — although perhaps a bit more forcefully — my concerns about it. Mr Moutray said that the strategy is the culmination of more than a year's work, yet we are now being asked to endorse a strategy that contains many explicit commitments that have not been costed. My question to Mr Moutray is: what is the cost of all the explicit commitments that the Assembly Commission has entered into in the strategy?

Let me remind Members of some of them: the Assembly will be represented at major events; there will be an Assembly festival every year, of which there will be seven or eight different dimensions; there will be a visitors' centre; a permanent exhibition; a retail and book shop; a dedicated education room; a mini-Assembly Chamber; live streaming; a ticket office; an electronic booking system; a public café; the replacement of broadcasting in the Assembly; an intuitive website; new media staff; and a new continuous professional development co-ordinator.

How much will all that cost? The Commission asks us to sign off on a document that states that those things will happen, and I want to know how much they will cost. That is a reasonable question at a time of economic stringency. The community with which we want to engage will not deny that the initiatives may be worthwhile and important, but it will ask how much they will cost.

The second issue is a possible contradiction, a point on which Sue Ramsey touched earlier. Paragraph 2 on page 4 states:

"This strategy will be the subject of a public consultation exercise."

Is it or is it not a fully fledged public consultation exercise? If it is, we cannot make commitments to do things until the exercise is finished; if it is not a fully fledged public consultation exercise, let us say so. Let us admit that we are not having a fully fledged consultation with the people of the North with whom we are meant to engage. What is the answer to Sue Ramsey's question, which I have also asked? That surprises me, given that the report is the culmination of a year's work. What consultation was there with those who came through this Building over the past year — the teachers, educationalists, businessmen and students? I would like an answer. Given that we have all those mechanisms to consult the community, as well as an educational advisory service and an annual audit, what consultation has been held over the past year with the visitors to the Building to proof those proposals against what they thought was the best way to proceed?

I listened to Mr Neeson talking about a space audit. Every hour, somebody goes round every room in the Building to see whether we are in them; that is

preposterous. I know where I was this morning, and it was not upstairs in my room. I was in the Chamber in the morning, the Senate Chamber afterwards, and I returned to the Chamber this afternoon, just like many other Members. The space audit may be an evidence base on which to decide on accommodation in this Building. It is not much, if you ask me.

Finally, I have serious issues with the Assembly Commission, which has been guilty of grave error in the conduct of much of its business over the past year or two. That is why it is before a fair employment tribunal as I speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is outside the terms of the debate, Mr Attwood; please return to the motion.

Mr Attwood: It may or may not be. However, being before a court of law does not build much confidence in the community's mind, and we are talking about building confidence in the community.

Mr Moutray: I thank Members for their contributions this afternoon. The debate was generally constructive and useful, and the Commission fully appreciates Members' views. It is clear that Members from all parties welcome the need for the Assembly to engage with the public.

However, engagement represents a challenge for all working legislatures. The Assembly already finds it difficult to meet existing demands for access, particularly to Committees. It is not unusual to walk around the corridors of Parliament Buildings to find visitors to Committees waiting outside for a space to become free. However, greater understanding of the role of the Assembly, and fostering a sense that the Assembly welcomes visitors, must be desirable for a democratically representative body.

I have already mentioned the importance of young people to the future of the Assembly. The Assembly's Education Service has done much over the years to educate young people on what is happening in the Building. However, the facilities available for education are totally unsuitable. In the medium term, the Assembly Commission is committed to providing a dedicated space for education so that a wider range of programmes can be provided for more schools and for more schoolchildren, as well as for teachers and adult learners.

As I said earlier, the Assembly receives a huge number of visitors each year. Measures have been undertaken to improve the security of Members, staff and visitors, and those measures have attracted significant adverse publicity. Although the case for the new arrangements is clear, the perception of some people is that the Assembly has become less welcoming even though it now receives more visitors than before the new arrangements were implemented. In addition, much has been done to improve access and facilities for all visitors, but there is much more to do to improve

the welcome that visitors receive. That will include the development of a dedicated visitors' centre, incorporating a permanent exhibition on the work of the Assembly, as well as a public café.

Parliament Buildings is the home of the Assembly, but the Assembly is getting out and about with increasing frequency. Committees normally meet in Parliament Buildings, but over the past year, they have made significant efforts to engage with communities in their own areas. I have already mentioned the forthcoming 'Your Assembly, Your Say' roadshows, and the Assembly Commission's efforts to improve the way in which the Assembly connects with people who cannot come to Parliament Buildings. In addition, the Assembly is developing educational outreach programmes to increase the scope of its educational outreach activity.

The Commission is committed to engaging with people in their communities, and we will hold outreach events, public meetings and talks in communities throughout Northern Ireland. Over the next year, the Commission will hold roadshows not only in the nine constituencies that were mentioned initially, but in every constituency.

By meeting groups in the heart of communities, we will raise awareness of what the Assembly does, how it works, and how community groups and individuals can engage with the democratic process. In the longer term, we will introduce video-conferencing technology into the Assembly to bring MLAs closer to the public. The Assembly will also increasingly be represented at local events of strategic importance; for example, at the Balmoral Show.

The Assembly Commission is committed to engaging with the business sector, and it has worked with a wide range of local businesses to form the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust, as my colleague Sean Neeson mentioned. The purpose of the trust is to advance and encourage business understanding of the Assembly and also MLAs' understanding of business. The trust has operated since 2002, and it has the support and involvement of all the main political parties in the Assembly.

The trust recently hosted Lord Mandelson, Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, and has also organised fellowships that place MLAs into local businesses. Recently, Declan O'Loan spent some time working in Mivan, while Simon Hamilton worked with easyJet.

The Assembly Commission has begun work on the development of a good relations strategy, and it is important that Members from all sides of the House contribute to the development of that strategy. Although some Members have raised issues, it would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt the collective view of the Commission.

The Commission has set an ambitious agenda for change in how the Assembly engages with the public, and we aim to deliver on it. It is important that the Assembly not only functions effectively as the devolved legislature for Northern Ireland, but that it is seen to be effective.

There are many detractors who will always be sceptical about anything that happens in the House and who will always be cynical about the commitment of MLAs to creating a better future for all.

5.45 pm

To those detractors, I have one point to make: exercise your democratic right, get out and vote and play your part in strengthening democracy. If you do not like it, change it. Engage with the Assembly and help us to create a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

The media have an essential role to play in scrutinising the role of the Assembly, and all of us strongly defend that role. However, the media also have a role to play in communicating the positive work that takes place in this House and the vital work of Committees. That is a role that the media embrace infrequently. A few weeks ago, the Assembly sat for almost eight hours and debated important issues for Northern Ireland, including a five-hour debate on the Budget and the future role of credit unions. Therefore, it was a surprise to find the main headlines of local news media focusing on a one-minute exchange on terminology between Members. The media must continue to scrutinise the work of this House and must also play their part in strengthening democracy and creating a better future for all.

I have outlined much, but not all, of the positive work advanced by the Assembly Commission. We do not underestimate the challenge of engaging with the public, but we need to make a start. I hope that Members from all sides of the House agree that this engagement strategy will help to improve the public's perception of our role, which is to work for them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Engagement Strategy developed by the Assembly Commission, which is aimed at improving public engagement with the Assembly, its committees and MLAs.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Members' Rights

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we begin, I remind Members of their general duty to behave responsibly and to exercise caution to ensure that nothing that they say may prejudice any matter that may come before the courts. In particular, I caution Members that certain matters associated with the inquiry into the death of Mr Billy Wright are at present sub judice. In accordance with the requirements of Standing Order 73, such matters should not be referred to during the debate.

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

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the need for elected representatives to be able to protect the confidentiality of information brought to them by constituents and sources; acknowledges the importance of being able to pass on to the appropriate authority information in the public interest without breaching that confidentiality; believes that an erosion of these expectations and rights would seriously undermine the ability of the public representatives to perform their duty and, if unchecked, will emasculate the powers of the Assembly, and undermine the role and trust the public must have in its elected representatives to protect and represent them without fear of prosecution or interference.

In bringing this important motion to the House, I seek the support of the Assembly for the protection of public representatives who are regularly given information of an important and sometimes sensitive nature. Invariably, that information is given because it is in the public interest to have the particular matter examined. Such information would never have been disclosed if the discloser felt that his or her anonymity were not protected. The question for the House is whether public representatives should betray their source or informant, or should the person giving the information be totally satisfied that the information disclosed by the source will be protected.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

At this stage, I stress that there is a vast difference between information imparted in the public interest and that of a malicious nature. The protection of information, including the identity of the source, is not something to be taken lightly. If something is disclosed in confidence, that confidence should be respected. Where would public confidence lie if everyone using their freedom of speech were immediately shopped by their elected representatives? I suspect that there is not one Member of this House who has not, at some time, been given information of a confidential nature, with

the informant, or person who delivered the information, expecting their identity to remain confidential.

I venture to suggest that there are Members who hold information on the perpetrators of some of the worst atrocities that Northern Ireland has come through. However, nothing and no one is calling on them to disclose that information under the threat of prosecution. Similarly, when asked to disclose who fled their ranks for the greener fields of dissident republicanism, those Members will not be drawn. Although that is not right, it is their right to remain silent. That said, the authorities have yet to attempt that method of investigation.

In general, data protection legislation means that information cannot be disclosed that could harm the credibility, safety or security of an individual. There is an additional exemption for those covered by client confidentiality. Many professionals, including solicitors, journalists, clergy and doctors, are exempt from the threat of prosecution for not revealing the personal details of anyone whom they represent or deal with.

New attitudes towards the victims of domestic violence mean that the Public Prosecution Service and the police no longer have to rely on the injured party to provide a statement about his or her attacker. Instead, an investigation is carried out, and a case is built on the facts as gathered. That alleviates the victim from pressure and from fear of reprisals.

If journalists were made to name their sources, very little information would succeed in reaching the public domain. It is written in the National Union of Journalist's code of conduct that under no circumstances can sources be divulged, and, on the whole, the courts have accepted that. The code forbids journalists from divulging information that has been passed to them. It says that a journalist:

"At all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed".

It states that a journalist should differentiate between fact and opinion. The code of conduct also says that a journalist:

"Protects the identity of sources who supply information in confidence and material gathered in the course of her/his work".

Those who have sought to legally challenge journalists to name their sources have made very little headway. It usually ends up with the reporter coming out a hero for standing his or her ground.

Why then should we, as public representatives tasked with speaking for constituents and their issues, be subject to a rule any different to the rules for the aforementioned? Constituent confidentiality is vital and something that public representatives strive to uphold.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly code of conduct, under the heading "Public duty", it states:

"Members have a general duty to act in the interests of the electorate and the community as a whole; and a special duty to their constituents."

Under the heading "Selflessness", it states:

"Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest."

Therefore, we are duty-bound, under statute, to address the inconsistencies and injustices that, unfortunately, occur in daily life. Not to do so would be to default on our roles, abandon our principles and, of course, betray our constituents.

If we in Government cannot be permitted to tackle issues on the strength of whistle-blower or tip-off scenarios, I suggest that very little would ever reach the Floor of this House. Gross injustices could come about if whistle-blowers are stifled, which is exactly what will happen if people lose their trust in Members' ability to deal meaningfully with issues. Client confidentiality should not be limited to the professions that I have mentioned; it should be automatically extended to cover public representatives.

In a question on 10 May 2007, a Member of the House of Commons said that it was wholly unacceptable that private and confidential correspondence involving constituency issues between a Member and a Minister was released into the public domain. In answer to that, Jack Straw said:

"I share his concern ... The issue is not about protecting the ... Members of Parliament; it is about protecting the rights of our constituents to correspond with us in confidence."

Taking another angle, I am concerned about what those who request such information require it for. What do they plan to do with it? Could it be that it is to hound or discredit a whistle-blower or to shine a more positive light on a potentially embarrassing or volatile situation that the individual concerned has exposed? If an incident or issue has been flagged up and reaches the public eye, it is vital that not only is that problem appropriately addressed but that the person who divulged the information is protected from any harm for their efforts.

I call on Members to support the motion, which is built on not only security but on freedom of speech. People will stop coming forward and will, therefore, continue in situations that are grossly wrong. Elected representatives are people who are elected by the community for the community to address their concerns and to speak out on their behalf. I am drawn to the use of the phrase "don't shoot the messenger". If Members are approached by someone who wishes to remain anonymous, we must respect their right, and that person should be protected, rather than pressured into disclosing more about the problem.

I commend the motion to the House, and I look forward to hearing what others have to say on it.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin will abstain from the vote on the motion. We had hoped that the contribution of the first Member from the DUP to speak might have shed more light on why it tabled the motion at this time. However, following the comments of the previous Member who spoke, I am no further enlightened as to why the motion has been tabled. The speculation and suspicion that was in my mind before I came into the Chamber is only further embedded by the Member's comments. I am conscious of the guidance that the LeasCheann Comhairle issued before the debate started, so I will ensure that I stay inside the lines that have been drawn for us.

Sinn Féin supports parliamentary privilege. We do not support the abuse of parliamentary privilege. The motion, as it is worded, is too wide-ranging for us to add our names to, because we believe that it could be used to abuse parliamentary privilege. In the past, Members opposite have used the British House of Commons as a showpiece where they get up and name individuals, blaming them for all sorts of acts and leaving those individuals vulnerable to attacks from other sources with no right of defence in any court in the land. Therefore, we will not support any system that allows the abuse of parliamentary privilege and the abuse of other people's rights.

The proposer of the motion did not say whether he sought privilege for knowledge of criminal acts. Is the DUP suggesting that if someone comes to any Member of the House with information about a criminal act, we have the right to hold that information? Is no guidance contained in the motion to say that Members have a duty to take that information to the PSNI? I cannot consciously stand here in front of you and say that, under my parliamentary privilege, I will hold on to that information. Therefore, all those questions are still racing around my mind having listened to the previous Member who spoke.

Therefore, given that Members are somewhat restricted, and understandably so, in what we can say in the House, I will cut my comments short and say that the DUP has not given enough clarification about why it has tabled the motion. The motion is too broad-based and in our opinion, allows for the abuse of parliamentary privilege. Much more work would be required on the subject before Sinn Féin could sign up to any guidance or privilege to which the DUP referred. Go raibh maith agat.

6.00 pm

Mr A Maginness: I want to say at the outset that the subject of the motion is a complex legal issue. I am not certain that this particular motion, no matter how well

intentioned, addresses the issue, which is obviously very important. I suggest that the motion should not be put to a vote. Although the important issues should be aired and discussed, the motion should not be put to a vote in order that a more definitive position can arise from the debate.

Any privilege that Members of this House have is based on statute. No inherent privilege is based in this House; however, in the House of Commons, for example, an inherent privilege exists that does not arise out of statute. Therefore, the Assembly's situation is completely different from that of the Houses of Parliament. However, all Members instinctively and naturally accept the need for elected representatives to be able to protect the confidentiality of information that is brought to them by constituents or, indeed, that comes from other sources.

The question is whether that protection of confidentiality should be absolute or qualified. If it is to be qualified, to what extent and in what circumstances? It goes without saying that it is important for public representatives to be able to pass on information that is in the public interest without breaching confidentiality. The question is whether such a right exists at present. I am not certain that it does, in fact, exist in law.

I appeal to the proposers of the motion to ask the House to seek legal opinion and expert advice on this important issue; I have not seen any sort of legal advice that could inform the House properly on the motion. I want to see the legal basis of any such right that Members purport exists for individual MLAs.

Certainly, in the Republic, such a right was asserted in the Brendan Howlin case. In circumstances that were similar to those that have been discussed in the debate, a TD was expected to reveal his confidential sources to a tribunal of inquiry. He refused to do so. In that case, the Supreme Court decided that the TD did not have a right to protect his source and, therefore, he had to reveal it to the tribunal. That raises an important point: if a tribunal of inquiry is to carry out its work, it needs to be able to probe information and facts. That may require the disclosure of a source in order to provide proper and credible evidence to the inquiry so that it can carry out its task properly and thoroughly.

I do not believe that the law would be any different or much wider in Northern Ireland as regards giving an absolute right to a Member of this House. It is probably true to say that any erosion of the perceived right to confidentiality could undermine the public's trust and confidence in dealing with MLAs, with the result that that trust and confidence could be affected adversely.

The Assembly must consider the matter very carefully before reaching specific conclusions. There have been circumstances in the House in which a Member has purported to have got information from

the IRA — in the case of Conor Murphy, for example — about a killing in south Armagh.

In those circumstances, is it right for a Member of the House —

Mr Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr A Maginness: In those circumstances, is it right for a Member to protect and to not reveal his source? I will leave that question to the House.

Dr Farry: We can speculate about the set of circumstances that has prompted the Members to propose the motion. I will judge the issue based on the wording of the motion, make general comments and avoid straying into particular cases that may be pertinent at the moment.

It is worth noting that the motion is almost a self-declaration, and its proposers could, perhaps, clarify its ultimate purpose. Does it call on another body to recognise that right, or do the proposers feel that motion will establish those rights? I have no difficulty with the wording of the motion. I am conscious that MLAs are not simply legislators whose role is to pass judgement on draft Bills. We also hold the Executive to account and represent constituents. In that sense, although our role is not the full equivalent of an MP under the British constitution, it mirrors it to a large extent.

MPs and MLAs have an important function to provide an effective challenge to the Executive and other authorities. Our role sometimes involves bringing information, which would not otherwise have been known, into the public domain. There are plenty of examples of situations in which such actions have been deemed to be in the wider public interest, several of which arose in the British system recently. That is important.

If there is potential to disclose such information, does that provide a fundamental barrier to individuals passing information to MPs or MLAs with confidence that that information will remain secure? A question mark about that matter could create difficulties. At one end of the scale, we might talk about serious matters of Executive misconduct or, indeed, criminal offences. At the other end of the spectrum, people might offer information on a constituency casework basis. It is a broad issue, and it is important that constituents have full confidence in our ability to respond to their needs.

I concur with remarks that public representatives must act responsibly and trustfully. I take on board John O'Dowd's comments on that matter and his perception of the situation. He, and others, might believe that privileges have been abused in the past. It is incumbent on MPs and other public representatives

to demonstrate discretion and responsibility when conducting their actions.

In some senses, the UK has an unwritten constitution, in which there are an implicit set of checks and balances. In Northern Ireland, given that we are in a subordinate situation, those balances are more formal. There is a tradition and an assumption to place trust in public representatives. In recent years, that trust has been called into question because of a series of financial and other scandals. There has been a loss of confidence in the system.

I appreciate that from some people's perspective, the ability to allow MPs and MLAs an unfettered sense of responsibility has, perhaps, been compromised to a certain extent. Nonetheless, it is important to return to first principles and recognise the basis of the function of a public representative, which is not unique to Northern Ireland and applies in other contexts. Furthermore, we must appreciate the importance of public representatives' ability to do a job, not only on behalf of their constituents, but in the wider public interest.

I await the rest of the debate with interest, but I am minded to support the motion.

Mr McCallister: Like other Members, I recognise the importance and need for elected representatives to treat with respect information brought to them by constituents. Every Member will have worked for constituents who have presented them with highly sensitive issues, which are often borne out of vulnerable positions. It is crucial that we respect the information that is presented to us as much as possible within the law. It is vital that the public have confidence and trust in their representatives if democracy is to work.

With that in mind, the Ulster Unionist Party recognises the merits of much of the motion. All Members will know that we are given the protection to speak freely in the Chamber — however, parliamentary privilege is extended to ensure that democratic debate is uninhibited. We cannot expect the extension of parliamentary privilege — in the Assembly or at Westminster — to all aspects of an MLA's conduct and life. In that regard, I question the link between protecting information given to MLAs by constituents with the undermining of the ability of public representatives to perform their duty in the Chamber and the emasculation of the powers of the Assembly.

How individual Members treat information given to them by their constituents is up to their own discretion and understanding of the law. They should know that if they make information public, they, and the person they represent, will be open to the rigours of the law.

There is legislation to deal with the passing of information to the appropriate authority in the public interest without breaching confidentiality. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 — or whistle-blower

legislation — provides a framework of legal protection for individuals who disclose information to expose malpractice or matters of similar concern. The Act covers the raising of genuine concerns about crime, civil offences, miscarriages of justice, danger to health and safety or the environment, and the cover-up of any of those. It covers almost all employees in almost all professions.

We all want to protect those who confide in us and who trust us with information, but more important still is the protection of the democratic integrity of the House and the justice system. However, having said that, I respect and understand the principles of those who proposed the motion.

Mr Attwood: I did not anticipate being called to speak — I think that I have been ambushed by my own party in case I do not take the right line. I concur with Mr Maginness. I ask the DUP to consider not moving the motion — which has happened on previous occasions — given the context of the debate and having heard the concerns that were raised. Without prejudice to whatever the motivations may be behind the intentions of the motion, that would be the right course of action.

It would be the right course of action for several reasons. First, the language of such a motion must create certainty and avoid doubt; that should be the standard against which any motion of this sort in particular — although it applies generally — is judged. With a motion of this nature — which has implications for difficult issues of law, as Mr Maginness and others outlined, and where there are already existing legal provisions, as outlined by the Member who spoke previously — if the proposer of the motion wants to get the support and sympathy of the House, its drafting should be absolutely precise to remove doubt and create certainty.

I suggest to those who drafted the motion that although a great sense of the thinking behind the motion can be grasped, as Lord Morrow fully outlined, nonetheless, the motion must be measured against existing legal provisions, precedents and standards in other legislatures.

6.15 pm

Is the DUP satisfied that the wording of the motion is consistent and can be reconciled with the existing legal provisions that were outlined by Mr McCallister and by the existing requirements and standards that govern these issues in legislatures, including our own? That is a simple question, and the DUP must be able to say with certainty that it has measured and tested the wording of the motion against those standards.

I listened to Lord Morrow's remarks, and I have enormous sympathy for his position. In recent weeks, visitors to my constituency office have given me

certain information that is not only about individual cases but raises much more general issues about the conduct of certain people in my constituency. Therefore, I have a great sense of my obligations in respect of such matters.

Although I have not been given any specific information — for example, about an individual or about particular acts of criminality — I have been given information in the round about widespread issues of criminality that may involve a range of people and organisations. I have to decide what to do with that information, so I have a great deal of sympathy for Lord Morrow's point of view. However, I do not know whether this approach, whatever the motivation might be, is the right way to deal with the issue.

I want to be crystal clear about one point, which was touched on by my colleague Alban Maginness. In circumstances in which it is brought to our attention that criminal activity has taken place, and in which there may be information that is of interest to the police and the legal authorities — particularly when a case is live — the balance of argument may be swayed in favour of the obligation to pass that information to the PSNI.

I mention the case that Mr Maginness described only because it has already been raised and not to make a wider political point. However, when a Member of the House met members of the IRA, was the information imparted at that meeting not within the gift of that Member, and should it, therefore, have been passed to the police, given that there were issues about the IRA and that it was alleged to have been an illegal organisation? Furthermore, given that, in a particular case, information might have been made available to —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank all Members who participated in the debate. When my colleague Lord Morrow proposed the motion, he made it clear that no Member of this or any other House should be above the law. That goes without saying, so I was somewhat surprised that the Member for Upper Bann Mr O'Dowd said that the debate was about the privilege of the House. The debate has nothing to do with the privilege of the House. If Members wish to table a motion about privilege in the House and how it should operate, that is a separate matter, which may indeed warrant a debate at another time. However, the motion deals with something entirely different, which goes to the heart of our constitutional rights.

Edmund Burke made his feelings clear to his constituents when he said:

"Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement".

On that basis, the House has a responsibility to lay down a firm marker about the level of respect and position that the House and its Members should have when it deals with the public and when the public deals with it. The motion makes that abundantly clear and accords a proper standing to the Assembly and its Members. It seeks to protect Members so that they can do their job without interference or molestation and without being forced to compromise the people who send us here.

It is important that those principles and markers be laid down firmly. In moving the motion, Lord Morrow mentioned that other sections of the community appear to have certain protections. For example, the legal and medical professions have client confidentiality. Indeed, certain clerics and priests also claim confidentiality. Such protections — as well as those that are enshrined in the journalistic code, which Lord Morrow mentioned — are all recognised, and that is important.

We have brought to this House today a very important contest that examines where power and responsibility rest. Do they rest with the courts? Do they rest with inquiries? Do they rest with Parliament? What is the role accorded to Members of the Assembly in that contest? I believe that there is a struggle —

Mr A Maginness: I do not think that the Member was minded to do what I had suggested, which was not to move the motion. That might have been an appropriate way in which to deal with this matter. If the Member had not moved the motion, he could have referred this matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges and let it consider the issue and substance of the motion. That might have been a reasonable way in which to deal with this matter.

The issues that have been raised have been raised properly. They are issues of great merit — nobody disputes that. However, they are complex. It would have been much better if the House was not divided, but had got proper legal advice on this matter, so that it could have come to a definitive view based on the advice of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will come to that point; I will not avoid it. I was going to address that issue later on.

As I was saying, we should recognise that there is a struggle of constitutional proportions taking place. Are this Assembly and its Members to be slapped around and to kowtow to others, or have we been accorded a proper place? We should guard jealously the general position that the people have given to us. If we throw that away lightly, we will regret it in time. It has come to the point where this Assembly and its Members are starting to be challenged. Other people are pushing the envelope in respect of the role this Assembly plays. In other words, are the people really in control of this

country's destiny? We should lay down a firm marker as to where we believe the demarcation lines are.

In May 2007, in the House of Commons, Jack Straw was asked about correspondence between a Member of Parliament and a Minister. He made it clear that the names of constituents should be protected — even from freedom of information inquiries — because of the constitutional right of constituents to correspond freely. That right is not about protecting a Minister, a Member, or a privilege; it is about protecting the rights of the people, and that is what this motion is about.

I agree that, on the one level, this is a complex matter, but it is one that we should seek to grapple with immediately. This motion has been down for debate for two weeks. Members have had the opportunity to consider the motion and to speak to each other about it. Indeed, the Business Committee has discussed it. Members should have used that time wisely. They should not have to come to this House seeking to push the issue further down the pipe and talk about it at another time. Rather, Members should have come to this debate with their minds firmly cast on where they want to go. I take the point that that Members can take this matter forward in a number of ways, if the motion is supported. Mr Maginness suggested two ways in which that can happen. He suggested seeking legal advice or taking the matter to Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Those are matters that Members can then take forward. However, there must be a starting point, and that starting point has come. For that reason, we should pass the motion.

The Member for Upper Bann Mr O'Dowd said that this was about the privileges of the House — the motion is not about privilege as defined when a Member speaks in the House, it is about a much wider and more important constitutional issue.

I welcome the general comments of support by the Member for North Down Dr Farry and the general support and merit given to the motion by the Member for South Down Mr Wells.

It is a matter of public record that a number of inquiries are taking place in Northern Ireland. It is a matter of public record that an inquiry into the death of Billy Wright is taking place. It is also a matter of public record that several Members have been called to give evidence to that inquiry. It is a matter of public record that there are High Court proceedings taking place to compel Members to divulge their sources to that inquiry. Those are all matters of public record.

The House must decide whether Members should be allowed to be bullied, pushed or squeezed to name constituents in order to satisfy the ego of someone else, or whether the rights and liberties of the people of Northern Ireland, which we should guard jealously, should

be protected by our actions and by our judgements as to whether we name, or do not name, people. That is the matter before the House; nothing else.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the need for elected representatives to be able to protect the confidentiality of information brought to them by constituents and sources; acknowledges the importance of being able to pass on to the appropriate authority information in the public interest without breaching that confidentiality; believes that an erosion of these expectations and rights would seriously undermine the ability of the public representatives to perform their duty and, if unchecked, will emasculate the powers of the Assembly, and undermine the role and trust the public must have in its elected representatives to protect and represent them without fear of prosecution or interference

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Provision of Hospital and Healthcare Facilities in Mid Ulster

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for putting this item on the agenda for debate. The issue is very important as we try to provide healthcare facilities for rural areas of the North.

Mid Ulster is the centre of the North and has a population of approximately 95,000, 70% of whom live in rural locations. There is lack of access to public transport, many roads are in rural areas, and there is poor infrastructure due to neglect. It is unthinkable that an area such as Mid Ulster does not have a major hospital with acute services.

Yet, instead of working towards the goal of getting a major hospital for the area, the Department is trying to remove the limited services that we do have. Since Maurice Hayes was permanent secretary of the Department, the policy seems to have been to reduce services, transfer beds, say that a service is unsafe and reduce it further by closing hospital departments. Is the service now unsafe because it has been run down?

We have already had the closure of South Tyrone Hospital, the Tyrone County Hospital, Lurgan Hospital, Armagh Community Hospital, Downe Hospital, and a number of other hospitals. The maternity and major-surgery units in the Mid-Ulster Hospital have been closed, and it now has a limited accident and emergency service, a day clinic for minor injuries and limited opening hours for other services. There has been a reduction in the doctor red-eye service at Dalraida Hospital but no increase in the ambulance service that was promised when other hospitals were closed. Anyway, an ambulance is no replacement for a hospital bed or for surgery in an operating theatre.

There are no maternity services in Tyrone, the largest county in the North, or in south Derry. If one looks at a map of the North, the whole centre has been deprived of hospital and healthcare facilities, which makes the area unsafe as a place for people to have children or to live in. There is a lack of acute services to meet the needs of the people who live in the area.

We will be told that we need large numbers to provide those services, but we have a mass of people in the centre of the North who have been deprived of those services.

As the distance from there to Antrim is the same as from Antrim to Mid Ulster, distance is not an issue. Even the few respite facilities for disabled children or young adults in Mid Ulster have been diluted.

6.30 pm

The proposed closure of the accident and emergency department and remaining acute services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital will reduce it to a day clinic. It is also proposed to close Cherry Lodge children's respite facility in Randalstown, which is the only facility in the area, and it has limited capacity. It is proposed to replace that facility, but no such replacement is in sight.

Investment is continually being made in Altnagelvin Area Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital, the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Belfast and to a lesser extent, Antrim Area Hospital. However, with the exception of the RVH, the built size of none of those hospitals was sufficient to compensate for the closure of that number of hospitals. Neither the size nor capacity of Craigavon Area Hospital, for example, has been increased to enable it to deal with the closure of the hospitals in south Tyrone, Armagh and Lurgan.

Several further issues also come into play. Members have been told that the review of public administration (RPA) will result in savings, but the issue is that £13.5 million has already been paid out on voluntary redundancies under RPA. We have also been told that there will be a reduction in front line services and that 700 nursing jobs will be lost in the near future. How long will it be before many of the top civil servants and board directors who have been replaced return to the Health Service as consultants and advisers, as happened in the teaching profession?

Over the years, various trusts and workers in the Health Service have said that the hospitals that are being promoted, such as Antrim Area Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital, are in the wrong place. If a decision were being made today about where to build a hospital, neither location would be selected because of an insufficient population. The population must move in from the rural areas to make those hospitals viable as far as the Department is concerned. Despite those hospitals being in the wrong place and not providing a quality service, the Department will continue to invest in them, and, therefore, the situation will get even worse.

Members have been told that, over the years, the services from the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital worsened, and it became, therefore, unsafe to continue to provide healthcare in either. Subsequently, patients were transferred to either Antrim Area Hospital or Craigavon Area Hospital, but do they provide a safe service? Both hospitals are

overcrowded, and the services that were previously provided to local people have, therefore, been diluted.

People working in the trust have said that maternity services at Antrim Area Hospital cannot cope with the increased demand. Members know that maternity services in Craigavon Area Hospital cannot cope with the increasing number of patients, because no additional facilities were put in place. Again, local people have been deprived of services that they previously received.

Will the Minister guarantee that Antrim Area Hospital provides a safe service? In the House in March 2008, I raised the case of an elderly patient who was suffering from *Clostridium difficile* and had been put on the Liverpool care pathway for the dying patient. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that he did not know what that was. I highlighted the case because local people had come to me. The patient's family told me that they had to intervene to ensure that their mother was taken off that care pathway. Fortunately, 12 months later, that woman is alive and healthy.

On that occasion, the Minister warned me that I was scaremongering and that he hoped that I could back up my comments with material evidence. I have done so, but I have yet to receive a reply from the Minister. He has not apologised for the hospital putting a patient on a pathway for the dying long before her time. I was right, and I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to apologise. That woman's family are entitled to know exactly what happened and which consultant took the decision to put her on a pathway for the dying. What did the internal inquiry, which has never been made public, reveal, and what changes have been made to ensure that it does not happen again? Does Antrim Area Hospital provide a safe service?

The people of Mid Ulster deserve a better service. Members have heard about the legacy of past mismanagement and the running down of services and hospitals. We must ensure that those services and hospitals are rebuilt. In the past, the Minister's party made it clear that were it to be allocated the Health Ministry in the future, it would do so.

Well, there is silence there at the moment, because we do not see any rebuild at the present time; we see the closure of more and more hospitals.

People in the rural part of Mid Ulster are entitled to the same quality of Health Service provision as those who live in the cities, towns and villages across the rest of the North. We want healthcare facilities in the centre. I call on all parties to set aside their political differences and to come together to ensure that we get a proper healthcare facility there. If one looks at a map of the North, there is a complete vacuum in the centre. There are no acute healthcare facilities or maternity

facilities in the centre of the North. A representative of nurses and midwives appeared on television today and stated that people had to travel unsafe distances to get to hospital.

We should not stand idly by and let this continue to happen. We have witnessed the closure of a number of different hospitals — the South Tyrone Hospital, the Tyrone County Hospital, Armagh Hospital, Downe Hospital, and other facilities that have provided healthcare — yet, we do not see anything else being put in their place.

We have been promised that there will be a new hospital in the Fermanagh area. However, I am quite certain that we will come back here in the future and be told that Fermanagh does not have the mass or the need; that it is too much of an outreach area, and that a new hospital is not needed, which will save millions of pounds. If this is a savings exercise, we want to see an end to it. We want proper healthcare facilities in the Mid-Ulster Hospital.

This is not just about hospital services; it is about day-care facilities, health-centre facilities and facilities for GPs to provide proper services and care. It is about midwives and nurses in rural areas trying to provide a service against all odds, and it is about home-helps. All of those services have been reduced time and again. The main hospitals are being closed, and people are not in a situation to provide services. It is very important that we do not stand idly by and watch that happen in silence.

There is a poem by Martin Niemöller who, in 1946, made comments about those who listen in silence.

"When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.
When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.
When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I was not a Jew.
When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out."

In the hospital situation, let us say that they came for the Dungannon and South Tyrone Hospitals and closed them, and those outside the area remained silent because it did not affect them. They then came for the Omagh hospital, and divided the Omagh and Fermanagh people into different camps, and in dividing them, put the hospital where they decided, and the ordinary public remained silent. Now they have come for the Mid-Ulster Hospital, and we cannot remain silent.

We have to stop the rundown of hospitals at some stage. Let me tell Members: they are coming for Daisy Hill Hospital, Lagan Valley Hospital, the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine, the Mater Hospital, the Ulster

Hospital and Whiteabbey Hospital, because the present strategy in the Department seems to be to have one hospital. It used to be that there should be six golden hospitals; now it seems that there should be one — the RVH — and all funds and resources will go there. Sometime in the future, Altnagelvin Hospital will simply become an outreach clinic for the RVH.

We have to stop the decline before it continues along its present line. I hope that the Minister will look at the North in general and say: there is a rural community there, let us look at that rural community and target it to provide a proper healthcare facility in the centre.

Let us not continue the line of maintaining and rebuilding hospitals that were built in the wrong place in the first instance. Let us go west of the Bann and build a proper acute hospital that will provide all the facilities that are required. As I have said, the distance east and west of the Bann is the same; it does not matter where you start from. I want to see an improved hospital service facility. I want to see a stop to the rundown, and I ask Members not to remain silent, but to speak out now. It does not matter who the Minister is, or what party he is from. We should be speaking out on behalf of the constituents of Mid Ulster to ensure that they have proper healthcare facilities.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. However, I find it somewhat ironic that it is a Sinn Féin Member's name on the Order Paper expressing concern about the Mid-Ulster Hospital, because it was a former Minister from his party who launched the document that has brought about those proposals. That is an unfortunate position.

I wonder whether we have witnessed a genuine road-to-Damascus political conversion, in which Sinn Féin has done an about-turn on this matter, or is it simply political opportunism. Let us never forget that the original sponsor document emanated from his party's Minister, and the implementation of the processes in that document has brought us to where we are today. Indeed, our community has had to witness the constant drip, drip of an unfolding process that continues to undermine the services that are provided for it, and that is leading swiftly to the demise of acute-service provision at the Mid-Ulster Hospital.

It should also be noted that during the consultations emanating from the publication of the 'Developing Better Services: Modernising Hospitals and Reforming Structures' document, the then Sinn Féin Members — including our absentee MP for Mid Ulster, Martin McGuinness — were strangely silent. Indeed, to a hurt and concerned community, that silence was breathtaking. In the end, the Sinn Féin Members pledged their support to the Minister, and, therefore, accepted her proposals to downgrade the essential acute services that were being provided at the Mid-Ulster Hospital,

thereby leaving a vast geographical area of Northern Ireland devoid of acute-hospital provision.

I welcome the Member's conversion, and I hope that he continues his fight —

Mr Molloy: Irrespective of what other Members said, does the Member remember that this Member spoke out about the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital and disputed the loss of those services with her party? Furthermore, I traced the history of those measures not to Minister Bairbre de Brún, but long before that to a previous permanent secretary, Maurice Hayes, and to the direct rule Ministers who were in charge at the time.

Mr I McCrea: I was coming to that point; however, given that the Member has raised it, I will deal with it now. I give the Member his dues, because it is sometimes difficult for people in all political parties to speak out against their party's Ministers. On this matter, I accept that he has spoken out about the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon. I also accept the research to which he referred, which leads back to direct rule Ministers. However, at that time, the Assembly had an opportunity to change the policy. Unfortunately, there have been many occasions when direct rule Ministers took the people of this Province in a direction in which they did not wish to go.

Those of us who have genuinely opposed the downgrading of acute services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital over many years can rightly condemn the present proposals. However, it would be unacceptable if some Members were to play to the crowd and use the community's fears for their own selfish ends. I accept that Sinn Féin no longer holds the ministerial portfolio for health, but the stark reality is that its fingerprints are all over the proposals.

For many years, the DUP fought with conviction against any proposals to downgrade acute services. Indeed, my father, who represented Mid Ulster for many years as an MP and as a councillor in Magherafelt, consistently led the fight to oppose the proposals. It is unfortunate that since my election to Cookstown District Council in 2001 and to this House in 2007, I find myself in the same position.

Magherafelt District Council and Cookstown District Council have continually joined together to oppose any such proposals. Unfortunately, even in 2006, when further reductions in services took place, the present situation appeared to be a fait accompli.

6.45 pm

The Ulster Unionist Party holds that ministerial office now, and it is that party that will put the final nail in the downgrading of the Mid-Ulster Hospital, if not — as some believe — its closure. The hospital may not close today — in fact, I know that it will not close

today — it may not close two years from now or ten years, but some believe that it will close. We have to give some credibility to the notion that the hospital will close.

The previous Member who spoke referred to a number of services across the constituency. We have seen the proposals for Cherry Lodge, which plays an integral part in the lives of many people in Mid Ulster. In the past 24 hours, we have seen the closure of the acute services at Tyrone County Hospital, and a few years ago, the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon lost its acute services. That is unacceptable. The west of the Province is crying out for acute-service provision.

Last Friday, I met some senior officials of the Northern Trust at an accident and emergency department. I also met some of the nurses who were on duty that day. They want to keep acute services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital; they want to be able to provide the service that has been provided so excellently for many years, but, unfortunately, the continual erosion of services has left them in a position where —

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree that the Health Service provisions — be they acute care or primary care — should be free at the point of delivery. There is an issue about investing for health. I am a member of the Health Committee, so I am well aware of what is happening. Does the Member accept that for years, our health sector was mismanaged, affected by bad decisions that were made by direct rule Ministers, and underfunded? Will the Member join me in calling for additional money for the Health Service from the Finance Minister — his party colleague — so that we can have a focus on acute services across the North?

Mr I McCrea: I agree that the Health Service has been underfunded for many years. However, I am sure that the Member will accept that the Health Service received a lot more money in the current Budget than it did before. That is not to say that it has as much money as it needs. If we had an open cheque, I am sure that health would get its fair share.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister ensure that services are retained across the west of the Province? I raised that matter previously with the Minister at Question Time.

Mr Armstrong: I speak as someone who was born in the constituency of Mid Ulster, who still lives there and who relies on the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt. My four children were born in the Mid-Ulster Hospital, as were five of my six grandchildren, so no one needs to tell me how important the hospital is to the local people.

Nobody wants to see any hospital being closed or downgraded, but we have to live in the real world — one

in which we are facing a worldwide economic downturn. Unfortunately, Mid Ulster is not immune to that.

In the last Administration here, I recall that a Sinn Féin Health Minister gave the go-ahead for the ending of acute services at the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh. I have no doubt that many people in west Tyrone will not have forgotten that.

I have heard members from other parties criticise the Health Minister, but I have no doubt that much of their criticism is motivated by party-political considerations and that they are playing to the gallery.

Although a lack of resources is not the only factor in play on this issue, Members of other parties who are concerned about Health Service cuts should recognise that money is finite and that the Minister does not have a bottomless pit of money at his disposal. I suggest that they approach the Finance Minister to support the Ulster Unionist Party in its quest for more resources for the Health Minister.

Mr Molloy: I was reading a newspaper cutting outlining what the Member, before Mr McGimpsey took on the role of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, said about the closure of the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the bed waits in the Antrim Area Hospital. Will the Member explain why, all of sudden, he now accepts that the Mid-Ulster Hospital should close?

Mr Armstrong: I have no problem explaining that — the Mid-Ulster Hospital is not closing.

On the positive side, according to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's current consultation, 'Modernising Health and Social Care Services: The future of Health and Social Care Services in the Northern Trust', it is anticipated that a wide range of services will be retained in the new multi-million pound facility at Magherafelt, where there will be enhanced facilities and staff training. Services will include: a nurse-led minor injuries unit; day-case surgery; outpatient services; diagnostics services; care for the elderly, including rehabilitation and assessment; palliative care and inpatient beds; and a co-located health and care centre.

In short, the hospital is not closing, but it cannot be denied that the local people will see the loss of A&E services as a major blow to the area. Experience tells us that the problem is not due solely to a lack of financial resources, although there is no doubt that funding will always be a major issue in the Health Service.

Not long ago, the Mid-Ulster Hospital's accident and emergency unit had to be closed temporarily due to staffing problems. There has long been an issue about attracting doctors to the Mid-Ulster Hospital due to a perceived lack of opportunities, because of relatively low numbers of patients as compared with a

city-based hospital. I recognise that the trust has attempted on a number of occasions to attract senior clinicians to the Mid-Ulster Hospital, but the reality is that medicine is changing and clinicians want to work in large teaching hospitals, where they can specialise in particular areas and improve their expertise. That is the reality, but it is clearly a problem for those of us who live in the west, where the population is smaller.

The concentration of acute hospital services in a number of key areas means that it is even more important than ever — particularly in the often-neglected west of the Province — that the Department for Regional Development devotes sufficient resources towards improving the road infrastructure. That will allow people to access hospitals in the likes of Craigavon, Enniskillen, Coleraine, Altnagelvin and Antrim more easily. Conor Murphy, the Minister for Regional Development and a member of Sinn Féin, can confirm that I am in regular contact with him about the dreadful state of the roads in Mid Ulster. I am sure that all Members for Mid Ulster will agree that the roads there are really dreadful and are a total disgrace because no money has been put into them this number of years.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Member agree that the fact that the roads are in such poor condition will mean that the time that it takes for an ambulance to get from a house to Antrim Area Hospital, for example, will be increased?

Mr Armstrong: We all know that if there are bad roads, vehicles cannot drive as fast, and we also all know that the Minister has put on new ambulances that may, perhaps, be able to cushion the journey over those rough roads. However, more money must be spent on our roads. I will not be letting up on that effort, and I will bring the matter to the notice of the Minister for Regional Development again.

I welcome the announcement that was made last autumn regarding the Health Minister's huge investment in the modernising and upgrading of the ambulance fleet. That will certainly assist in getting paramedic treatment to patients, and that money was very well spent. We must achieve a first-class Health Service for the people of mid Ulster; that is what I want to do, and I know that the Minister shares that aim.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Probably the only part of my speech that will share commonality with Mr Armstrong's is that I speak as someone who not only represents Mid Ulster but is from the area, and who has had extended family treated successfully, and others not successfully — that is no reflection whatsoever on the intensity of care available — in Mid-Ulster Hospital.

I place on record my comments about the accident and emergency departments at Mid-Ulster Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital. Despite the critical

pressures that staff are under and the vulnerabilities that they face, they perform like true heroes.

It is not often that Mr Armstrong and I disagree on issues. However, there is a need to inject a strong flavour of reality into the situation. It was said earlier that acute services at Mid-Ulster Hospital are not to close. For those of us with family who have suffered difficult circumstances, quick access and proximity to an A&E department is paramount. Whether people come from Pomeroy, Ardboe or up in the mountains in The Six Towns outside Draperstown, it is paramount that they can receive urgent care. It does not matter how good the road is, access to Craigavon, Antrim or Enniskillen is second-rate for people who live in those areas. By the time that they would reach any of those destinations to receive the necessary treatment, or by the time an ambulance would reach them — I will talk more about that later — their situation could have moved into the critical, or possibly fatal, zone.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that, like me, the Member read an article in one of the local papers a couple of weeks ago in which a mother referred to the fact that her son had attempted suicide. Had it not been for the staff at Mid-Ulster Hospital's accident and emergency department, she felt that he would not have survived. He needed urgent treatment, and if he had had to travel any further, there was every chance that his life could not have been saved. Given what the Member has just said, does that not put into stark reality the need for retaining acute services at Mid-Ulster Hospital?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for his comments. I read about the case, and that is one of the sadder examples in which — although fortunate for the person involved — access to medical treatment at the A&E department at Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt was available.

I will highlight a few stark realities. The A&E facility at the hospital has been reduced and downgraded. It now closes at 11.00 pm, and I have been in there with people at 11.00 pm when the doors close. It is quite simple: the patient must travel to Antrim Area Hospital or to some other hospital. Staff at Mid-Ulster Hospital are under strict instructions not to admit or treat people who arrive after 11.00 pm.

Another stark reality is that if that facility is shut, the existing waiting times of three to seven hours at Antrim Area Hospital's A&E department will become 12 to 15 hours before a person is treated. That harsh reality must be placed on record. If acute services at Mid-Ulster Hospital closes, people will, potentially, have to wait for 12 to 15 hours. Another fact is that Antrim Area Hospital regularly communicates with Mid-Ulster Hospital to establish whether it has any beds, instead of what we had been led to believe,

which was that people would be moved to Antrim Area Hospital to be treated there. That is an unacceptable situation.

We have been told that services are being modernised by moving facilities and trying to concentrate them in Antrim Area Hospital, when, clearly, its A&E department cannot cope. It has neither the beds nor the resources, and staff are under serious pressure.

I will move on to another aspect of healthcare in the area, which is the doctor-on-call service. Someone from the area around Pomeroy, Ardboe or Kildress might need a doctor, and that doctor could be in Ballycastle or Coleraine. In fact, the present proposal is that in order to get treatment from a doctor on call during those hours, that person would have to travel to Coleraine. That is a grossly unacceptable situation for those of us who live west of the Bann and who have seen acute hospital services stripped and denuded from County Tyrone.

7.00 pm

I will move on to the Ambulance Service. Again, it has excellent staff who are doing their best with limited resources. An extra ambulance was supposed to have been provided for use in Mid Ulster. I am very reliably informed that that ambulance could be as far away as Newtownabbey when it is required in Mid Ulster.

I welcome the upgrade to the ambulance fleet. I hope that it comes through and that it benefits my constituency. However, observers have told me that it is not an infrequent occurrence for ambulances in the existing fleet to break down. One person recently told me that a breakdown lorry travelling through Moneymore with an ambulance on tow is not an infrequent sight. That may be an unfortunate reality, but it is a reality nonetheless.

We are told that there are no doctors for A&E, and that, consequently, services must be centralised at Antrim Area Hospital. I may be approaching the situation from the perspective of an ordinary 5'8", but why can a contract not be developed that co-ordinates the services of doctors and consultants between Antrim and Magherafelt, in order to provide the service that people west of the Bann need and to which they are entitled?

I am also reliably informed that in other parts of the world the practice is to decentralise services outwards, rather than centralise them in large hospitals. Doing so ensures that the medical services needed by people in more rural areas are more accessible to those people.

Antrim A&E is already under severe pressure. Maybe some money could be saved by not producing glossy brochures that tell us everything in the garden is rosy, because it simply is not. There are intolerable pressures in Antrim A&E, and people are suffering. If we want to deliver a service, we must address those

bed pressures, and doctors must have at their disposal all the services and resources that they need.

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

Mr McGlone: Sure, just one wee minute, Mr Speaker.

In conclusion, is it acceptable to the Assembly that someone dies, not on a trolley — on which people are lying at present — but in an ambulance, because not even a trolley is available? I do not believe that that is acceptable to the Assembly. God forbid, but I hope that we avert such a situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I have listened with interest to the points made by Members. I certainly share their interest and concern about the provision of hospital and healthcare facilities in Mid Ulster. I would like to meet the people who “reliably inform” Patsy McGlone and other Members, because I do not recognise some of the scare stories that he is producing. Scaring is not the way to take forward a debate on the future.

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No, I will not give way. The Member has just sat down.

We are governed by a document and a strategy called ‘Developing Better Services’ that was actually developed by Sinn Féin, Mr Molloy’s party. That strategy allows for moving the hospital and Health Service estates into the provision of modern, up-to-date healthcare for the Northern Ireland population.

The reality is that medicine is changing. It has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. No longer does a general surgeon on a ward fix a broken leg, take out an appendix, remove tonsils and carry out a cardiac operation on the way past. All of those operations are specialised, and because that is the case, we have specialist teams. We have it that way because patients do better. The outcomes from the Health Service for patients have dramatically improved and increased in the past 20 years. That is why we are tailoring the hospitals to suit the situation.

Billy Armstrong made the point that there is a very serious revenue consequence with which I am dealing in the Health Service. We want to run a Health Service that is comparable to that in England, but we are currently £300 million short, which will rise to £600 million. In fact, if I had accepted the draft Budget that Mr Ian McCrea and his party were so keen for me to accept, we would have been a long way short even of that. I did not accept that draft Budget, and the Department received extra money. At the time, I said that that was as good as it gets. However, the reality is

that that is not enough. That is the other element with which we are dealing.

I noticed that Francie Molloy has an ongoing vendetta against Antrim Area Hospital. It is a very good hospital, and has dedicated staff who provide a first-class service. The hospital overwhelmingly hits the 95% target of treatment for accident and emergency patients within the four-hour target time. Mostly, the hospital achieves much better than that. There were some breaches over the winter period as a result of the onset of winter flu — the worst for 10 years — which not only increased the throughput of patients, but meant that we lost some staff.

That being said, the staff in the accident and emergency department of Antrim Area Hospital are very good. The department has an enormous throughput. The fact is that it is that sort of accident and emergency department in which specialist doctors want to work. Each night, the accident and emergency department in the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt may deal with one patient who has suffered a heart attack. The accident and emergency department in the Antrim Area Hospital handles approximately seven such cases each night. That is what the head of accident and emergency services told me. That means that the staff keep a very high level of skill. It is about maintaining those levels of skill.

The Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt cannot maintain the sort of levels of specialism that are required to deliver what Members appear to think can be delivered in a local hospital. However, the fact is that we are increasingly specialising. We are not, as Francie Molloy suggested, coming down to one hospital. That is nonsense. There are nine acute hospitals in the system: six major acute hospitals, including the Royal Victoria Hospital, which is the regional acute hospital, and three smaller acute hospitals — the Daisy Hill Hospital, the Causeway Hospital and Erne Hospital. The Causeway Hospital was built 10 years ago. For the benefit of Mr Molloy, we are about to spend £260 million on a new hospital in Enniskillen. If that does not determine our intentions as far as the Erne Hospital is concerned, I am not sure what would.

What I heard was a disappointing litany of scares, half-truths and rumours from reliably informed sources. However, some sources are not that reliably informed. Mid-Ulster Hospital has over 500 staff, which includes approximately 250 nurses and 32 doctors. There are no plans to reduce that workforce by any appreciable amount as we deliver the new hospital that is planned for Mid Ulster. That new hospital will receive investment of approximately £25 million. At the same time, there will be investment in the Antrim Area Hospital of approximately £84 million, and a number of health and care centres will also be built, including one in Magherafelt.

We are trying to change the way that we do things. There is not a retreat from Mid Ulster — the hospital is not closing. The Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh is not closing either. Omagh is getting a new hospital at a cost of £190 million. If Members cannot hear and understand those messages, I despair. Antrim Area Hospital is a major acute hospital. If memory serves me correctly, it has approximately 450 beds. It also has a large number of staff who deliver a first-class service.

Francie Molloy talked about the Liverpool pathway for death, but there is no such thing. There is a Liverpool care pathway. That is in place because every year in Northern Ireland —

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No; I will not. The Member should allow me to speak. I have listened to him. I would have given way if it had been a serious contribution. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Every year, approximately 15,000 people die in Northern Ireland.

Most of them would like to die at home, but around 70% die in hospital. Of course, there must be protocols, and procedures must be in place to provide that end-of-life service. Therefore, whenever I talk about cradle-to-the-grave care, I mean it literally. It starts with maternity care and carries on all the way through to the end of life, and that end-of-life service is provided by the Liverpool care pathway.

Indeed, the Regulation of Quality Improvement Authority investigated the Liverpool care pathway, which was devised by the Marie Curie Palliative Care Institute and which is in universal use in the UK. That end-of-life service focuses on providing comfort, respect and dignity for the patient. The incident to which Mr Molloy referred was investigated, and recommendations were made, all of which were implemented. The report cannot be published because of data protection. That is the situation. *[Interruption.]*

If Members shout at me from a sedentary position, I do my best not to respond. *[Interruption.]*

The Health Service is changing, as is the way in which services are delivered. The Health Service has to change. Let me give another example: there has been a lack of investment in the Health Service over the past 30 years because of the need to fund a terrorist —

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No, I will not give way.

Mr Molloy: If the Minister will not reply to comments that are made from a sedentary position, perhaps he will reply if I stand up —

Mr Speaker: Order. It is quite obvious that the Minister has no intention of giving way, so the Member should not persist in interrupting.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, when contributions are serious, I am happy to give way, and I normally do so. However, I will not give way in this instance.

After 30 years of funding a terrorist war, there are huge capital infrastructure deficits in Northern Ireland, not least of which are in the health sector. We need more than £7 billion, which is a huge sum of money. The allocation is less than half that, which means that we are a long way short of the amount that we need to provide the necessary investment, therefore meaning that I have to prioritise again. When one does not have enough money, one has to prioritise. One of the priority areas in the 10-year capital programme will be the Mid-Ulster Hospital, among others, and it will be part of the investment that I talked about. Billy Armstrong listed what we see as the future services in the Mid-Ulster Hospital under ‘Developing Better Services’ plan, which was introduced by a Sinn Féin Minister and supported by Sinn Féin.

Francie Molloy talked about hospital closures, but I have not closed a single hospital. I resent those types of spurious, silly accusations. Investment is coming forward and will continue to do so. It would happen faster if there were more money in the kitty, but the fact is that there is not. As I see it, the Mid-Ulster Hospital has a very secure future, delivering a slightly different type of service for Magherafelt and the surrounding area. That service will be absolutely essential for the future, and it will work in combination with the network of hospitals.

Let me focus on the key elements of accident and emergency and acute services. The Ambulance Service has a target response time of eight minutes, and the key is that each ambulance, whether it be an emergency A&E ambulance or an RRV, has a skilled paramedic on board. It is essential to get that paramedic to the patient as quickly as possible. Ambulances are not meant to rush out, scoop up a patient and then rush them back to the hospital; ambulances take the A&E service to the patient. That is what the A&E ambulances and the RRVs do, and the target is to respond to 75% of life-threatening cases within eight minutes. The service is very close to meeting that target.

In addition, there is a four-hour waiting target for A&E units, and Antrim Area Hospital has a very good record in that regard, too. Antrim Area Hospital provides the main A&E unit for the area, but it also has support from other places.

Comments were made about County Tyrone, but health services in Northern Ireland are not delivered by county. The county line is an old regional boundary line that dates back to Tudor times, but we deliver by trust area and in accordance with trust boundaries. Of course, Magherafelt falls within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. The Northern Trust has two acute hospitals, as do the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. Those are the trusts that people in the area can access, but normally the blue-light ambulance will go to Antrim Area Hospital.

I have been to the accident and emergency department at Antrim Area Hospital on more than one occasion. It is a first-class accident and emergency service, which is provided by first-class staff, and I wish that Members would occasionally acknowledge that and acknowledge the work that is being done in our hospitals and throughout the Health Service. The Health Service is changing. It is getting stronger, it is getting better, and it is getting better for everyone, including the people of Mid Ulster.

Adjourned at 7.15 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

18 February 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Michelle O'Neill

Witnesses:

Mr Jeff Brown	}	Department of Education
Mr Chris Stewart		
Mrs Eve Stewart		

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): John is unable to be here today, and you are welcome, Chris. The Committee is beginning to wear the officials down, with one down and four to go. Today's meeting must end at approximately 11.45 am because of a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) event taking place in the Long Gallery. That will curtail members' questions, but as I always say, the Committee is free to return to any issue that it considers has not been adequately covered.

Chris, perhaps we can divide the discussion into three areas and consider those in the following order: the commencement arrangements; the powers to make subordinate legislation; and the links to existing primary legislation.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): I am happy to do that. I apologise in advance for what will be a dry, technical presentation on a dry, technical paper.

Mr B McCrea: No change there then.

Mr C Stewart: That is the nature of the subject matter.

The paper describes the two ways in which primary legislation can be brought into operation: automatically on the date of Royal Assent, or at a later date by means of commencement Orders. The commencement arrangements for the Education Bill are set out in clause 54. As with most Bills, they include both mechanisms, so there is nothing unusual about that.

However, the proportion of the provisions that are covered by each mechanism is unusual. In this case, all the substantive provisions, including those to establish and assign functions to the education and skills authority (ESA), and to dissolve the existing organisations, will be initiated by means of commencement Orders. As Members will recall, that is to reflect the decision of the Minister and the Executive that the review of public administration (RPA) should be regarded as a single legislative programme and that the two required Bills must remain synchronised. Therefore, the commencement arrangements are designed to ensure that the timing of the implementation of the first Act can be adjusted, if necessary, to maintain that synchronisation.

The very few provisions that will commence on Royal Assent are set out in table 1 of annex A to the paper. Those particular provisions will be commenced in that way either for technical reasons or because they provide for actions that the Department will have to take in advance of the implementation date of 1 January 2010.

The technical issues are self-explanatory: both the clause giving the short title of the Bill and the clause that allows for the making of the commencement Orders must commence on Royal Assent.

The remaining provisions, significantly those that deal with staff transfer, relate to what the Department must do in advance of implementation. Although staff transfer will not take place until 1 January 2010, when the new organisation comes into operation, it will be affected by means of a series of transfer schemes that the Department hopes to prepare well in advance of that date.

Therefore, we need an early commencement of the provisions that allows us to draw up the transfer schemes. I assure the Committee once again that there is no suggestion that transfer will take place prior to 1 January 2010.

The Chairperson: Clause 50, which will be commenced by Royal Assent, states in subsection 1:

"The Department may by order make"

(a) and (b). Are those departmental Orders? If so, why are they not among the regulations set out in clause 51, which are subject to negative resolution procedure and laying before the Assembly?

Mr C Stewart: I was going to explain that in the second part of the presentation. The answer is that it is standard practice. Commencement Orders are, as you say, orders made by the Department; they are not normally subject to Assembly control. The reason for that is that the Assembly, in passing the Bill, will have made its will clear and expressed its agreement to the legislation coming into operation. It is then regarded as a technical matter for the Department to do so at the earliest possible date.

The Chairperson: Do members have any other questions about the commencement arrangements? Will the Department consult with the Committee on the timing of the other provisions coming into operation as set out in clause 54?

Mr C Stewart: Yes. We will keep the Committee apprised of everything that we propose to do. We will bring all the commencement Orders to the Committee in due course.

Mr B McCrea: Are the clause 54 commencement Orders also technical issues that do not require Assembly consent, or will they come before the Assembly by way of negative resolution procedure?

Mr C Stewart: Commencement Orders are not subject to Assembly control, but all the other Orders, except for those that modify primary legislation, are subject to negative resolution control procedure. The clause that gives us power to modify primary legislation is the other exception. Due to the significance of that power, it allows the Department to make or to modify primary legislation. That is an extremely significant power, and one that ought to be, and will be, subject to Assembly control.

Mr B McCrea: I understand why, in the past, negative resolution procedure was useful. It saved a lot of work, unless an issue arose. However, given the voting arrangements that we have and the sensitivity of these issues, is there any provision to make them subject to positive resolution?

Mr C Stewart: Yes; if the Assembly passed an amendment to that effect.

Mr B McCrea: That is a useful point.

The Chairperson: Do members have any other questions on the commencement arrangements for the Bill?

Mr McCausland: It is good to see that the Minister will be seeking Royal Assent for this legislation. That warms my heart.

The Chairperson: I thought that that would please you.

Mr B McCrea: Every dark cloud has a silver lining.

Mr O'Dowd: It makes you feel all warm inside.

The Chairperson: We move on to the powers to make subordinate legislation.

Mr C Stewart: We have already touched on these issues in answering members' questions.

The range of enabling powers contained in the Bill is set out in table 2 of annex B of the paper. Those broad powers provide for the making of subordinate legislation of three types: regulations, which are substantive law made by the Department to regulate or govern the exercise of functions on an ongoing basis; orders, which are of a one-off nature, and are made by the Department to exercise executive power or to make decisions in particular instances; and by-laws, which will be made by ESA to govern a range of local matters. As I have said, the arrangements for Assembly control of the various types of subordinate legislation are set out in clause 51.

All the regulations and most of the Orders are subject, as the Bill is currently drafted, to the negative resolution procedure. Exceptions to that are the modifying Orders that I referred to under clause 51, the commencement Orders themselves, made under clause 54, and Orders to transfer assets, made under paragraph 2(1) of schedule 4. As I have said, the modifying Orders are subject to the stronger Assembly control procedure of affirmative resolution, simply because of the significance of the power involved. Commencement Orders and operational matters, such as asset transfer Orders, as would be normal practice, are not subject to Assembly control.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 7 on page 132 of the briefing paper states:

"Clause 51 of the Bill sets out the arrangements for Assembly control of the subordinate legislation. All regulations and most orders made under the Act will be subject to the negative resolution control procedure."

Most Orders, but not all?

Mr C Stewart: No; the exceptions are the modifying Orders under clause 50(1), the commencement Orders and the asset transfer Orders.

The Chairperson: Other than asset transfer, what other operational matters would not be subject to Assembly control?

Mr C Stewart: Those are the only matters.

The Chairperson: So, those matters covered by clauses 51 and 54 and paragraph 2(1)?

Mr C Stewart: Yes; clauses 51 and 54 and paragraph 2(1) of schedule 4.

Mr B McCrea: Are those the only matters?

Mr C Stewart: Yes; there is nothing unusual in that pattern; it is standard practice that legislative counsel follows when drafting such provisions.

Mr B McCrea: When will it be appropriate for us to debate the issues that we have with the Bill? Should we raise them in the Committee, the Assembly or should we just come and have a word with you? When will we be able to get to grips with the issues that we have with the Bill's provisions?

Mr C Stewart: Any or all of those processes would be appropriate. If the Committee feels that the commencement arrangements in the Bill are not to its liking, it could table an amendment at the Consideration Stage.

The Chairperson: We have set a deadline of 20 February for the return of submissions from people who want to comment on the Bill. A couple of organisations have told us this morning that they will not be able to meet that deadline. We said that that is fine and that we will accept their replies at some stage. When we begin clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill, we will group the clauses as 1 to 5, 5 to 10, and so on. When it is time to scrutinise clauses 51 and 54, there will be an opportunity for Committee members to recommend changes if they are not happy. Am I correct, Chris?

Mr C Stewart: Yes; if there is a consensus in the Committee about amendments, we will take them to the Minister and return to the Committee with her views on them. We want to share with the Committee, at an early stage, a small number of amendments that the Department wants to table at Consideration Stage, to ascertain whether there is consensus from the Committee on them. It will be good if there is complete consensus between the Committee and the Minister on amendments. However, if there is not, we will await the will of the Assembly on the amendments.

The Chairperson: That would be useful. The Committee Clerk and I have not decided on a structure for how to address the clauses. That is something that we must consider; the way that we address the clauses should be done in a way that both helps the Department and reflects the Committee's view. That should be done so that no issues arise three months down the road. There is an onus on all of us to do that, which is why I have endeavoured, maybe not very successfully, to work methodically through the Bill. That is why we will address the underlying policies in the Bill until 20 February, after which we will start to work our way through its clauses. Chris, it may be useful to have a conversation with you about that.

Mr C Stewart: That is very helpful, and we would appreciate such an approach from the Committee. To facilitate the Committee's work, we intend to let you see the amendments that we will be proposing, or at least the areas that those amendments address, in the next couple of weeks.

The Chairperson: Which of the Orders contained in annex B of your paper are not subject to the Assembly control proceedings?

Mr C Stewart: The exceptions are the modifying Orders under clause 50(1), commencement Orders under clause 54 and the Order to transfer assets under paragraph 2(1) of schedule 4.

The Chairperson: Clause 50(1) refers to clause 12, Modification of employment law. Is that correct?

Mr C Stewart: Yes.

The Chairperson: Members should make a note of clause 50(1). Are members clear that clause 12, 'Modification of employment law', clause 54, 'Commencement', and paragraph 2(1) of schedule 4 are not subject to Assembly control proceedings?

Mr B McCrea: Is the "50" on your paper the same as clause 50(1)?

Mr C Stewart: That is a fairly standard provision that legislative counsel includes in most Bills.

The Chairperson: Is it subject to Assembly control?

Mr C Stewart: Apologies, Chairman. I think that I left that one out when I was giving you the list. It is clause 50, and allows us to make supplementary, incidental or transitional provision. It is included so as to provide grace, in case we discover that we got something wrong in the drafting of the Bill. It allows us to put it right quickly.

The Chairperson: Eleven years later, Chris.

Mr C Stewart: Perhaps not as quickly as that.

Mr B McCrea: For clarity, I have clause 12, clause 50(1), clause 54 and paragraph 2(1) of schedule 4.

Mr C Stewart: We will double-check the table for any inaccuracies.

The Chairperson: Which Orders and regulations in annex B are subject to affirmative resolution?

Mr C Stewart: The only one that is subject to affirmative resolution is clause 12. The power that it relates to is the power in clause 12.

The Chairperson: That is OK.

Mr B McCrea: What is that about clause 12?

The Chairperson: Basil, we want to establish what clause is subject to affirmative resolution. There is only one clause.

Mr B McCrea: Clause 12 is affirmative, but I have noted clause 12 in the same category as clause 50(1); that is what I thought that you had told me.

Mr C Stewart: That is correct.

Mr B McCrea: Are you positive?

The Chairperson: That is correct, is it not?

Mr C Stewart: That is correct, Chairperson. Only one power is subject to affirmative resolution procedure, namely the power in clause 12.

The Chairperson: Will you explain the powers in clause 12 that enable employment law to be modified, and provide an example of how they would be used?

Mr C Stewart: Upon reading, those powers may appear draconian. I assure the Committee that they are not. They are there to be used if needed to facilitate the operation of the employment model that we have described to the Committee. In other words, they provide the power, if needed, to slightly change employment law in order to assign a particular responsibility to the ESA or to a board of governors.

The powers do not enable fundamental changes to be made to employment law. Therefore, we cannot change or dilute the responsibilities of the ESA as an employer; nor can we remove the fundamental rights of any member of staff under employment law. I assure the Committee that that is neither our intention nor is it within the scope of the provision.

Mr B McCrea: That is a serious issue for many people. Mr Stewart has given the Committee assurances, but can anything be done to include those provisos in the legislation? People may consider such matters and surmise that the Department is assuming the power to do whatever it likes.

Mr C Stewart: That may be possible, but if the Committee is minded to bring forward, and sought legal advice on, such an amendment, I believe that that legal advice would be that the move is unnecessary, because the powers do not allow the Department to misbehave in the manner that is feared.

That provision is not new or unique. A similar one that uses exactly the same wording is included in the 1989 Order. It is a fairly standard clause that counsel would use in situations in which the Department wants to implement part of a policy that would otherwise be difficult because of an aspect of employment law. In that case, the power can then be used to remove whatever the minor issue is.

Mr B McCrea: The point is that the Department is given the power to do things that it forgot about or to rectify mistakes, of which everybody is capable. The other side of the coin is that people are worried about those powers being misinterpreted. I have no wish for duplication, but surely legislation must be explicit and make clear what is fully intended. I believe that a form of words can be found that will help both sides.

Nobody is saying that the Department should not have the power to fix things if they do not work out right. However, in their darkest moments, people must be reassured that legislation is not being used in a way that is contrary to that originally envisaged. Can a form

of words be found that will counter those complaints and help the Committee?

Mr C Stewart: I am sure that that is possible. At this stage, my advice is that that form of words may be better employed in the description, perhaps even in the explanatory and financial memorandum that accompany the Bill, rather than in the Bill itself.

Mr B McCrea: Is that binding? I am seeking guidance because I have not done this before. How binding is that explanation and guidance?

Mr C Stewart: It is not binding, in the sense that the explanatory and financial memorandum does not have the effect of law. However, the content of the explanatory and financial memorandum would be taken into account if there were a dispute and a court was required to make a ruling. In itself, it is not binding.

The Chairperson: How different is what is proposed in the management of this process to what happened in the administration and governance of health services? How different are the clauses in the Bill that effected those changes from those that the Committee is currently considering?

Mr C Stewart: Many aspects are similar. Many clauses in health RPA legislation and, indeed, in the legislation that set up the library authority are almost word-for-word identical to similar clauses in the Education Bill. That is because legislative counsel always likes to follow best practice when taking such matters forward.

For example, schedule 1 to the Bill sets out a range of issues on the composition, governance and operation of the education and skills authority. There is a similar schedule in the Libraries Act and in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act. Standard provision is used.

The biggest difference between the Bill and those other pieces of legislation is the commencement Order. It is unusual — in fact, it is unique in my experience — for that proportion of a Bill to be actioned by means of commencement Order.

Mr O'Dowd: I was going to raise the matter of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act as it relates to how this RPA process is being managed. I imagine that no piece of legislation can be used to subvert or undermine employment legislation or any other kind. In that sense, therefore, you should not be looking for reds under the bed.

If there are genuine concerns, they could, perhaps, be covered in the explanatory notes that explain the Bill's purpose in order to reassure people.

Mr C Stewart: It is right that a further, even slight, degree of reassurance should be offered. We did not

ask for that clause: legislative counsel advised us that it ought to be included in the Bill because it is a standard clause that would normally be included in provisions of that nature.

The Chairperson: If there are no further questions on that matter, we will move on to consider the links to existing primary legislation. That is where we will enter an absolute minefield. Perhaps, members, we may have to examine that again. I am well aware that the matter is extremely technical. Sometimes, questions are raised in everyone's mind about why there are schedules, commencement Orders, and all of that. We may need to give that consideration. This is the first time that the current Committee has taken on such a task. An understanding of the matter would be extremely useful; even if that means that we must return to it again and again. Eleven other pieces of legislation are affected as a result of the Education Bill. Do you want to jump into the water, Chris?

Mr C Stewart: I will jump into the water where only civil servants are comfortable, and even they are not terribly comfortable.

Chairman, your warning is timely. I wrote the paper with what you have just said in mind. It would probably have taken me at least a year to try to write a paper that covers every aspect of every existing Order, and taken the Committee at least a year to read. Therefore, I have not endeavoured to do so. However, I recognise that the Committee will, undoubtedly, want to come back to particular aspects of the Bill. We are more than happy to do so at your request.

In the paper, I have tried to illustrate the process that we have followed to link existing legislation to the Education Bill, and some of the principles that we have tried to reflect in doing so. As the paper explains, education legislation is some of the most complex and voluminous on the statute book. I spent much of the early part of my career in health, where, I can tell you, the volume of legislation is about 20% of that which exists in education. Therefore, to get through it is a challenge for any reader.

The paper lists the 11 education Orders that exist at present. In many ways, the most significant is the earliest one, the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which is, sometimes, known as the principal Order. It is the main piece of legislation. Seven of the other Orders are explicitly linked to it, because they contain provisions that state that they are to be construed together with 1986 Order.

That means that any definitions or interpretations in the principal Order apply equally to the later Orders. The net effect is that those eight linked Orders and, indeed, the new Education Bill should be read and interpreted as if they were a single piece of legislation.

I am afraid that this is when the fun starts, because it is not as easy as that. Each time a new Order was brought forward, not only did it add significant new provisions to the body of the legislation, but it amended significant chunks of the existing Order. Therefore, each time another layer went on the onion, the position became more complex and more difficult to follow.

Further complications arise from the fact that there are a series of provisions on the statute book that have not yet been commenced for a variety of reasons, be those policy reasons — because it was not felt necessary or timely to do so — or because, as we said earlier, errors were made, from time to time, in taking forward commencement Orders.

It was against that complex and difficult background that we sat down to examine the existing legislation and to create the necessary linkages with the Education Bill.

We scrutinised all the Orders in detail by examining carefully every word and every line. The idea was to re-orientate all that legislation so that it linked to the RPA arrangements. To use an analogy, it was like using a magnet to pull iron filings in the same direction. Specifically, we examined the transferring of functions from existing organisations to the ESA, eliminating any redundant functions that were no longer needed, resolving any duplication of functions; for example, both the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the education and library boards have some functions that are the same, and we did not need to transfer both sets — transforming some functions that needed to be changed, and a range of consequential amendments.

A great deal of other legislation that is outside the field of education has references to education and library boards, and, of course, we needed to change all those. All that added up to more than 1,200 repeals and amendments. Many of those were straightforward, but others required complex changes and careful consideration. Most of the simple amendments involved changing a reference from “education and library board” to “education and skills authority”. Legislative counsel, Mr George Gray, has taken a particular approach to doing that. He has drafted a catch-all provision in sub-paragraph 1 of schedule 7.

The effect of that provision is that after 1 January 2010, any reference in any of the education Orders to “education and library board” should be taken to read “education and skills authority”. That catch-all provision makes hundreds of changes to education law. Such references automatically change law, unless they are subject to a more bespoke amendment given explicitly in the Education Bill. The remainder of schedule 7 deals with other amendments, and schedule 8 deals with the repeals. As I said, I have not attempted

to list all those changes in the briefing paper; however, I have picked out a number of examples to illustrate what we tried to do and how we tried to do it.

I provided examples of the effects of the RPA legislation on the education Orders. Those include the transfer of functions, the proposal to eliminate a redundant function, the overlap of functions, or minor amendments to a function. I will not read those out now; however, we are happy to take questions on any particular aspect that members want covered.

I draw the Committee's attention to annex D of the briefing paper — schedule 5 to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 showing the effect of amendments in the Education Bill — as that provides a picture of what the legislation will look like. By including both the highlighted and the struck-out text, we tried to show the totality of the effects of the various amendments and repeals on that particular schedule.

The schedule deals with the appointment of governors to schools. That is quite a simple set of amendments; however, as members can see, unless one has the fully amended text in front of oneself, it is difficult to envisage the totality of the effect. We provided that example because a number of stakeholders read the Education Bill without reading the schedules of repeals and amendments in great detail — and, let us face it, why would they unless they had to — or the earlier education Orders and came to the wrong conclusion that we had removed the requirement to consult trustees of Catholic schools before the appointment of governors.

It is only when one sees the amended schedule in its entirety that it becomes clear that that requirement is still there. However, it has changed from a requirement to consult the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to a requirement to consult trustees. It is no longer the Departments or boards that will carry out the consultation; it will be the ESA. It is actually quite a simple set of amendments, but it illustrates the complexity and the challenges for any reader of the legislation.

We have also provided a very brief summary in tabular form of the main groups of provisions in each of the eight linked Orders, to try to provide the Committee with a map of education legislation. It is far from a straightforward map; it is not as neat and tidy as anyone would like it to be. If one were to ask, for example, where the finance provisions are, the answer is that they are all over the place, but mainly in the 1989 and 1998 Orders. If one were to ask where the main provisions for education and library boards are, they are mainly in the 1986 Order, but there are a few others scattered throughout the other Orders. It is a very complex map indeed.

We have not provided tables for three of the Orders. The Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 will be repealed in its entirety, so that table would be superfluous. The other two Orders, The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 and The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, will be subject to only a small range of amendments; therefore, we did not burden the Committee with two more tables that were not needed.

I am genuinely unsure whether that has been of any use to the Committee whatsoever. I hope that it has. If to any extent it has not, we are happy to take members' questions.

Mrs M Bradley: You could come back a thousand times to discuss this issue.

The Chairperson: I have said to the Committee a number of times that these are very technical issues. We all have a duty to ensure that we deal with them, but there is a limitation to what we can actually take on board. It is similar to issues involving finance; if one is not an accountant, one will have difficulty understanding all the issues.

In relation to paragraph 23 on page 136 of the briefing paper, will you explain the need for the insertion of a new article, 18A, into the 2003 Order, giving the ESA powers to direct boards of governors? I would assume that articles 17 and 18 of the 2003 Order provide relatively up-to-date and strong powers in that area.

The Committee Clerk: That paragraph of the briefing paper relates to clause 47 of the Bill.

Mr C Stewart: That refers to a transformed function. The Department has identified what it thinks is quite a significant weakness in the legislation. In relation to child protection, the desired end result is that there should be clear responsibilities on each person or body that has a role to play in education. It should be perfectly clear what their responsibilities are and what they are expected to do. There should also be measures to ensure that those responsibilities are fulfilled; that is where a gap was identified.

The existing provisions in articles 17 and 18 of the 2003 Order place clear responsibilities on boards of governors of grant-aided schools, but there seemed to be no effective means in the legislation for ensuring that they discharged those responsibilities. That is why the Department has suggested the additional clause, which would give the ESA the power to direct boards of governors of grant-aided schools if there is something that they are not doing, or are not doing correctly in relation to child protection. That is a significant provision.

The Department is sometimes told by stakeholders that it has given the ESA draconian powers to do all sorts of things; that is not the Department's view.

The one area where it has, very explicitly and quite deliberately, proposed that the ESA should have significant powers is on the issue of child protection. It is felt that if an issue of child protection arises, it would not be sufficient for the Department to be able to explain to the Committee afterwards exactly who got it wrong, and where the responsibility lies. The Committee would also expect the Department to have done something about that to ensure that it did not go wrong in the first place. That is why that power has been included.

The Chairperson: Is there a deficiency there, as the law stands?

Mr C Stewart: Yes, I believe that there is. At the moment, the Department is in a position, if something goes wrong, to come along afterwards and apportion blame. It is not in a position to make sure that it does not go wrong in the first place.

The Chairperson: Does that relate only to the ESA's power to intervene and to direct boards of governors in relation to child protection?

Mr C Stewart: Yes. That is the only subject matter —

The Chairperson: It is only in relation to that issue?

Mr C Stewart: Yes; it is the only subject matter on which the ESA can direct boards of governors. It has no role in directing them otherwise.

The Chairperson: If a board of governors decided to go down a particular road and do something else, subject to the board of governors meeting all other legal provisions, does the ESA not have the power to prevent the board of governors from taking a decision?

Mr C Stewart: That is correct, with the exception of child protection. That reflects the role and the ethos of the ESA that we intend. It is not intended to be a command-and-control body; it is there to challenge schools when necessary, particularly around raising standards, but primarily to provide advice, support and assistance. It is not a command-and-control organisation. The policy is 'Every School a Good School', not 'Every School a Controlled School'. That is our aim.

Mr McCausland: Under the new regime, will the general duties of boards of governors be altered? Perhaps I missed it, but is there a list of the 10 duties?

Mr C Stewart: That is in next week's paper, which the Committee has not yet received.

The Chairperson: Next week, we will deal with the specific issue of boards of governors.

Mr C Stewart: I will make sure that we list all the duties of boards of governors in next week's paper. The significant additional duty that is contained in the Bill is about raising standards. There are parallels to the issue of child protection: we want to ensure that

everyone who has a role to play in education is absolutely clear about their responsibilities. Nowhere in current legislation does it state that a board of governors is responsible for the standards of attainment in its school.

That is a deficiency that was highlighted very clearly in the 'Every School a Good School' policy. We want to put that right, but we have not given the ESA the power to direct boards of governors in relation to attainment standards. We have proposed that a duty should be placed on boards of governors to co-operate with the ESA and the exercise of its functions. I am sure that the Committee agrees that that is not as draconian as a power to direct.

Mr McCausland: Currently, the training for governors that is provided by the education and library boards is of indeterminate quality. How will that training be delivered in future?

Mr C Stewart: It will be delivered in a variety of ways. There will be a statutory duty on the ESA to provide that training and support, or to procure it. In policy terms, if boards of governors in individual schools, or in groups of schools, feel that there are sound and credible alternatives to the training services that the ESA provides, we are certainly amenable to the idea of them procuring training services themselves. We would expect the ESA to support them in doing so.

As John McGrath and Gavin Boyd said in a previous session, it is very much about changing the nature of the relationship between the ESA and boards of governors from that which currently pertains with education and library boards. We want to move away from the current position, in which education and library boards offer services and boards of governors can, essentially, take them or leave them, to a situation in which the ESA is sensitive and responsive to what boards of governors seek. It is a commissioning type of relationship: we want the services that the ESA provides to be driven by what governors tell it are necessary, rather than the other way round.

Mrs M Bradley: What Chris said more or less answers my question. In other words, the training that was provided for boards of governors was voluntary, whereas this time around, it will be compulsory. Is that correct?

Mr C Stewart: No, it will not be compulsory for —

Mrs M Bradley: Should it not be?

Mr C Stewart: There is an argument for that. It is certainly advisable. We are asking governors to take on a significant set of responsibilities. I do not think that any governor should do so without being adequately trained and prepared.

Mrs M Bradley: Are those responsibilities in relation to child protection?

Mr C Stewart: Absolutely.

Mr B McCrea: That gets back to the nub of the issue. I understood John McGrath to say in evidence to the Committee that the change in the ESA, as it is proposed now compared with it where it might have been before, was that it was to have a significant role in raising standards. I will look at the Hansard report to clarify what was said earlier.

Mr C Stewart: So will I.

Mr B McCrea: It is an important point. I understand that that change came from determinations by the Public Accounts Committee on literacy and numeracy failure and that the Department said that it had a great strategy but that it was unable to implement it. I understood that the ESA was to be able to direct schools to ensure that standards in all schools were raised, particularly in the key areas of numeracy and literacy. If I heard you correctly earlier, you said that that was not your intention and that all that you were going to do was point out to people that they might do better.

Mr C Stewart: The position is somewhere in between the two ends of the spectrum that you have described. We do not take a laissez-faire approach and simply point out to schools where they could improve and wash our hands of them. Equally, we do not give command-and-control direction. The 'Every School a Good School' policy is predicated on self-improvement and self-development by schools, so it is a schools-led process. The role of the ESA will be one of challenge and support.

Intervention powers exist in current legislation and are not being introduced in the Education Bill. Those are not powers to direct; they are what we describe as the graduated response. Help can be offered where it is required. If necessary, boards of governors can be supplemented with additional governors if there is a need to increase the competence or ability.

In extreme cases, such as a failing school, the composition of a board of governors can be changed or completely replaced. In the most extreme of all circumstances, a school can be closed. Those are the exception, and we do not envisage or want to be in that sort of position. Our role for schools that can do better is, primarily, to point out where they can do better and to immediately offer the help, support, advice and services that they need to lead themselves into a better position.

Mr B McCrea: I will not detain you, because there are other issues to discuss, but that gets to the nub of our concerns. I am still not sure whether the ESA is a friendly uncle or some sort of draconian policeman. Most of the governors value their independence and want to get involved, and I think that you have to come forward with clarity about what the ESA will be able to do. It is not enough to hide it in legislation that

fudges issues or is clear only to legislative counsel. We need legislation that the people who are being asked to run schools can clearly understand.

Mr C Stewart: That is entirely correct. The ESA is a friendly uncle or a critical friend, not a draconian policeman. When stakeholders say, as they do from time to time, that they do not like the legislation because it is full of draconian powers, I usually ask them to show those to me. They cannot, because those draconian powers are not there.

Mr B McCrea: I can. For a start, there is rule 101, the ability to add governors, the ability to change governors, and the ability, ultimately, to close schools.

Mr C Stewart: All that is covered by existing legislation.

Mr B McCrea: Absolutely, but according to some, we have a failing education system. The schools inspectorate says that 30% of schools might do better, so you might argue that you should have used those powers. The issue comes back to the fact that with the existing uncertainty, people want clarity. I am sure that we agree that we want clarity on who will do what and the powers that they will have. We do not want any surprises coming out of the woodwork.

Mr C Stewart: That is a fair point. I am sure that the Committee will want to hold the Department and the ESA to account for their use — or lack of use — of the powers in due course. Stakeholders often suggest that the Education Bill will introduce a new range of draconian powers: but that is not true. Although people might think that the powers are draconian, they already exist in legislation. As you said, we are criticised for not using those powers as often as we are criticised for using them.

The Chairperson: The Committee will discuss the issue of boards of governors at next week's meeting. Chris will circulate that paper on the basis of the Minister's letter to the Committee. Members will receive that paper in good time in order to ensure that they are able to read it and digest the issues therein before next Wednesday's meeting. Is that OK, Chris?

Mr C Stewart: I know what I will be doing this afternoon.

The Chairperson: Although I do not want to curtail members, I remind them that the meeting should conclude in the next few minutes.

Mr Elliott: I want to ask a brief question about a technical issue, because I have only become a member of the Committee recently. Can some of the 11 existing Orders not be subsumed into the new legislation in order to restrict the amount of cross-referencing? Is it possible to streamline the legislation?

Mr C Stewart: Yes, that is possible, and it is one of the Department's objectives. However, it will probably take some years to do so. This Bill will remove one of the Orders and will remove significant chunks from the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. I expect the second Bill to shear more off the 1986 Order to the point that very little of that legislation will remain. At that point, we might ask legislative counsel whether we can insert the remaining bits into different legislation in order to remove one Order entirely.

Stakeholders often ask — quite understandably and correctly — whether we could consolidate all the rules into one or two pieces of legislation. We can, and should, do so but not yet. Consolidation is a technical process that happens after legislation is reformed. Counsel cannot consolidate at the moment because it would be forced to hit a moving target, because the Department is still changing the legislation. When the two Bills on RPA are finalised — and, perhaps, one Bill to reform the legislation generally — we might be able ask counsel to create one consolidated piece of legislation. That is a mammoth and extremely technical task.

The Chairperson: Is the 1986 Order the oldest piece of legislation that governs education, or is the Department still governed by powers that date from 1807 or whatever? That issue has been raised numerous times by local authorities, which claim that there is an archaic piece of legislation from 1879.

Mr C Stewart: The 1986 Order consolidated the earlier pieces of legislation, the main one of which dated back to 1972. However, that is long gone. If my memory serves me right — if necessary, my colleagues will correct me — we discovered, through this exercise, that one or two pieces of the 1972 Order were still hanging around. We have dealt with such examples.

Mr Elliott: Tradition is great.

Mr C Stewart: I should add the caveat that some older pieces of legislation outside the education sector might affect education bodies. The Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878 might have some bearing on the activities of public authorities.

The Chairperson: That Act might affect some schools.

Mr C Stewart: My colleagues in voluntary grammar branch have told me that royal charters affect some schools. Moreover, some schools are companies limited by guarantee and are affected by companies' legislation.

Mr D Bradley: You mentioned the 'Every School a Good School' policy during your conversation with Basil. Does existing legislation contain all the powers that are necessary to implement that policy, or will the Education Bill create additional powers?

Mr C Stewart: The powers are in existing legislation. The Education Bill will clarify the responsibilities, but the interventions already exist in law.

The Department and the education and library boards each have some powers; those of the latter will transfer to the ESA. The strongest powers are, and will remain, with the Department. Therefore, if extreme circumstances arise in which a school must be closed, the Department will have the power to do that.

Mr D Bradley: Will you explain what you mean by clarifying the responsibilities?

Mr C Stewart: As I said earlier, nowhere in the current legislation does it clarify that boards of governors have a specific responsibility for standards of attendance at their schools. Equally, our colleagues in the education and library boards have told us repeatedly that they do not consider that their responsibilities for standards in controlled schools are made sufficiently clear in the legislation. That is why we are taking the opportunity to erase any doubt by ensuring that each person or body in the system knows exactly where the different responsibilities lie.

Mr D Bradley: Schedule 13 in annex C deals with:

"Education of children of compulsory school age; school attendance orders; duty of parent of registered pupil to secure his regular attendance at school; offences, penalties and enforcement."

Those responsibilities, or functions, are being transferred from the education and library boards to the ESA. Will home-schooling be affected by the Bill, or is it catered for in existing legislation that will not be changed?

Mr C Stewart: Existing legislation caters for home-schooling. If any of the education and library boards' relevant functions need to be transferred to the ESA, minor amendments may be required, but we are not making any specific changes in that area.

Mr D Bradley: Is home-schooling mentioned?

Mr C Stewart: Off the top of my head, Dominic, I cannot say exactly where the provisions for home-schooling are to be found. However, if they are contained in any of the primary Orders, we will, through a series of minor amendments, transfer the functions to the ESA. If it would help, I will check that and come back to you.

Mr D Bradley: Will home-schooling still be permitted?

Mr C Stewart: Yes; there will be no change.

The Chairperson: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of an independent school. Does that also apply to independent schools?

Mr C Stewart: Nothing in the Bill changes the position of independent schools, which are largely unaffected by the legislation on education — with one

highly significant exception. Independent schools are included in the inspection provisions and, therefore, can be inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Members, you will probably go home and read your Committee papers tonight and tomorrow night, and return next week with more questions. Again, I thank Chris, Jeff and Eve for their attendance. Chris, I look forward to seeing you and your colleagues next week, same time, same place.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

25 February 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Mr Edwin Poots
Mr Tom Elliott

Witnesses:

Mr Jeff Brown	}	Department of Education
Mr Peter Burns		
Mr Chris Stewart		

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): I refer members to their briefing papers for the session; the three items that we want to cover this morning are employment schemes, schemes of management, and boards of governors. Joining us are Chris, Jeff and Peter from the Department. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. Perhaps, Chris, you will begin with a word about employment schemes.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): Thank you, Chairman, and good morning members. I will pass over some clauses reasonably quickly, as I am conscious that the Committee's time is limited this morning, and I want to leave as much time as possible for questions.

Clauses 3 to 12 deal with provisions for schemes of employment, the aim of which is to capture and set out the employment arrangements that were outlined in the paper considered by the Committee on 21 January. Clause 3 will establish the education and skills authority (ESA) as the employer of all staff, teaching and non-teaching, in all grant-aided schools. Members will recall that the original proposal was to spread that provision over the two review of public administration (RPA) Bills, but, in response to representations made

to the Department, it will now be contained entirely in the first Bill.

Clause 3 also defines the term "submitting authority", which means the body responsible in each case for preparing and submitting the schemes of employment and the schemes of management. As drafted, the trustees are defined as the submitting authority for Catholic maintained schools; and boards of governors are defined as the submitting authority for all other schools. As we said at previous Committee meetings, the Department is considering an amendment to that clause, the effect of which would be to redefine the submitting authority as the owners or trustees of schools in all cases, but with the provision for the owners or trustees to delegate the function to boards of governors if they choose.

That reflects the views and representations made to the Department by stakeholders who made the point that owners or trustees are the guardians of schools' ethos and that they ought to have a role in preparing and submitting schemes in order to ensure that a school's ethos is properly reflected. However, if a board of governors owns a school, the amendment will have little effect because the owners and the board of governors are one and the same.

Clause 4 sets out the scope of schemes of employment; it requires each grant-aided school to have one, and sets out the matters that the scheme should contain. The clause provides that employment schemes can impose duties on the ESA and on boards of governors, and requires that the schemes be consistent with education law and with schools' schemes of management.

Clause 5 deals with the process of drawing up employment schemes. It places a duty on submitting authorities to prepare schemes and to submit them to the ESA for approval, and requires the submitting authorities to take into account any guidance that is produced by the ESA. There is, of course, a corresponding duty on the ESA to issue and periodically revise any such guidance and to include in it model schemes. Schools may adopt model schemes without change, adapt them to suit their needs if they so wish or produce their own schemes from scratch. The role of the ESA is to approve the schemes either without modification or, if necessary, with modification if the schemes are not consistent with education law or if a school has failed to take proper account of the ESA's guidance.

Clause 6 outlines the reserve powers of the ESA to impose an employment scheme in the extreme circumstance of a school's being unable or unwilling to produce one. Clause 7 provides for the revision of employment schemes by submitting authorities either periodically or at the direction of the ESA.

Clause 8 is particularly significant as it defines the effect of employment schemes in governing and regulating the actions of the ESA and boards of governors. Under clause 8, boards of governors will have a statutory duty to comply with their schemes of employment, and the ESA will have a reciprocal duty to put into effect decisions of boards of governors that have been taken in accordance with the schemes.

I emphasise that in its ratification role the ESA's powers are strictly limited; that is deliberate on our part. The ESA is limited to sending a matter back to a board of governors to be reconsidered if, in arriving at its decision, the board of governors failed to follow its own scheme of employment. The ESA will have no powers either to direct a board of governors or to change a decision of a board of governors; it can merely refer a matter.

Clause 9 and schedule 2 of the Bill take us into slightly different, but related, territory. They provide for the transfer of staff from voluntary schools other than Catholic maintained schools and grant-maintained integrated schools to the employment of the ESA. Staff in other types of schools, controlled schools and Catholic maintained schools, are transferred by other equivalent provisions; namely, clause 22 and schedule 3. Clause 10 establishes the ESA as the employer of peripatetic teachers and requires the ESA to develop a scheme of employment that is similar to the scheme that will be in place for each grant-aided school.

Clause 11 is one of the most complex and difficult clauses in the Bill. It is difficult to read, and is in pressing need of significant amendment. The focus of the clause is the common funding scheme and the payment of salaries. Members will be aware that some schools operate their own payment systems while others pay their staff through central arrangements operated by the Department. The aim of clause 11 is to permit those schools that operate their own payment systems to continue to do so in future if they wish or to opt in to the central arrangements. That is the effect of 11(1) to 11(4).

However, a complication has arisen as a result of an earlier piece of legislation, and there is a difficulty that stems from the definition of a maintenance grant. The law as it stands would not allow us to give boards of governors control over their salaries budgets. Clause 11 contains a work-around for that situation for voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools, but has not solved the problem for controlled and maintained schools. The net effect is that clause 11, as it stands, would prevent the boards of governors of those schools from having control over their salaries budgets. That will not do; it is absolutely at odds with our policy, and we feel that the clause must be significantly amended. We might even ask

for clause 11 to be withdrawn and substituted with an alternative.

Clause 12, which we discussed briefly last week, will permit the Department to modify employment law, but only where it is necessary to do so in order to ensure the smooth operation of clauses 3 to 11. It does not give the Department the power to change the fundamental responsibilities of employers or the fundamental rights of employees. I draw the Committee's attention to a typing error in our paper, which refers to paragraph 2 of schedule 9 — it should, of course, read paragraph 9 of schedule 2.

I have covered a great deal of material very quickly, much of which was technical, so Committee members may want me to expand on some issues.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Chris. Clause 8 gives the ESA the power to send back boards of governors decisions. If the ESA feels that there is something not right with a scheme that it has been sent by a board of governors, how long will it take for a resolution? Will the ESA continually send back a proposal until it is satisfied that its requirements have been met, even though a board of governors feels that it has done all that it could to ensure that a scheme is properly constructed? Will there be an appeal mechanism against either the ESA's modification to schemes or its final decision?

Mr Stewart: Your question raises two areas in which a board of governors could disagree with the ESA; the first is the preparation of a scheme. Our goal is an efficient and effective process; we do not want the ESA to take a long time or schemes to boomerang back and forth. The ESA will provide model schemes, which schools can consider. In submitting their schemes for approval, schools are asked to indicate the extent to which their schemes differ from the model scheme. That is to simplify the process; if a school adopts a model scheme without change, it can be approved almost instantly by the ESA. Similarly, if the changes that a school makes to the model scheme are slight, that will speed up the approval process. If a school starts from scratch and decides to write its own scheme, the process might take a little longer because the ESA will have to scrutinise it carefully and ensure that it complies with education law. However, we would expect that process to be completed expeditiously.

There is no formal appeal mechanism in the legislation, but if a school felt that the ESA was being unreasonable in holding up or seeking to modify its scheme, it could make a complaint to the Department. The Department would look into the matter and, if necessary, use its powers of direction under article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 if it felt that the ESA was not acting reasonably.

The other part of your question was what would happen if there was a disagreement between a board of governors and the ESA on a decision about a scheme. As I said, it is not our aim to have matters boomeranging back and forth between a board of governors and the ESA. The only grounds on which the ESA could decline to put into effect a decision by a board of governors is if a board of governors has not followed the scheme. It is not a question of the ESA second-guessing, disagreeing or coming to a different conclusion; if procedures have been properly followed, the ESA is legally obliged to put a decision into effect. If a school felt that the ESA was behaving unreasonably in that regard, a complaint to the Department would allow it to invoke the powers of direction under article 101 of the 1986 Order.

The Chairperson: The programme 'Room 101' has been shown on television more times than the Department has used the powers in article 101 of the 1986 Order; it has been used only two or three times in recent years.

Mr D Bradley: Are you suggesting that we put article 101 into Room 101?

The Chairperson: There may be one or two individuals whom I want to put into Room 101, but I will not go there.

You said that there is no formal process in the Bill. Would the Bill be enhanced and would protection for boards of governors be enshrined if there was an appeals mechanism? Would such a mechanism give boards of governors confidence? The Bill consistently tells us that management schemes will be subject to education and employment law. We are dealing with something that has a very technical and legal aspect.

I think that Committee members are worried that, as soon as the Bill is enacted, a problem may arise and everyone will say that the matter in question is not covered by the Bill, so there is not much that they can do about it. It will be too late then. From the Department's point of view, would it be advisable to have an appeals mechanism? Is such a mechanism included in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, given that the Health Service is experiencing a great deal of change? Would an appeal mechanism add value? After all, the role of the Committee is to scrutinise the Bill.

Mr Stewart: It is certainly worth considering. As for our sparing use of article 101, there is an African proverb: "talk softly and carry a big stick". We have not used that provision often, but schools and education and library boards know that it can be used if necessary. An appeals mechanism may give confidence to boards of governors, and I can understand why some may look for one.

However, rather than creating an additional specific appeal or challenge mechanism, it might be possible to incorporate into the clause a cross-reference to article 101; that could be done rather than introducing a new procedure. There is a precedent, as the inspection provisions include a cross-reference to article 101 that makes it clear that if we need to remedy a defect that has arisen as a result of the inspection of a school, article 101 can be called into play. Therefore making an explicit link to article 101 may be worth exploring if it would give confidence to boards of governors if they felt that, in the discharge of its functions under clause 8, the ESA was behaving improperly.

Mr Poots: My concern is that, although Chris is a very reasonable guy —

Mr Stewart: Will that be in the Hansard report?

The Chairperson: Yes; it is now official.

Mr Poots: Chris puts his case very reasonably. However, when one starts to implement such measures, one often finds that there are those in the Civil Service who push things to the limit and behave as jobsworths. Clause 8 runs contrary to the ethos of the review of public administration, which aims at reducing bureaucracy. However, clause 8 will result in the ESA's micromanaging the work of schools and their boards of governors. I do not know whether it is appropriate to have a provision that will allow that to happen. That is not what the RPA is about; therefore I question the need for clause 8.

Mr Stewart: We recognise that concern. Clause 8 and the policy have been drafted with a view to preventing the very scenario that concerns Edwin. The ESA simply must not get involved in the micromanagement of schools. It would be wrong, counter-productive and impossible, even if it were the right thing to do, the ESA will not have the capacity to micromanage to that degree.

However, we believe that clause 8 is necessary because if, in future, the question is asked who is the employer in education, the answer will be that it is the ESA and schools acting together: having a single employer and individual schools acting on behalf of the ESA in discharging functions. It is important that there is clarity in that relationship and in what schools are responsible for, what the limitations are, what the ESA is responsible for and, equally, the limits of its functions. That is what we propose with those clauses, particularly clause 8.

Members may wish to see more detail of that relationship in order to be satisfied that we have got the balance right. The difficulty with that is that the detail will be in the schemes of management rather than in the legislation; therefore it may take some time to instil confidence in members on that issue. However, without such a clause or such provisions,

schools would be at a disadvantage because the parameters of their relationship with the ESA would not be clear. There would be greater scope for the ESA to interfere unreasonably in the day-to-day management of schools if its responsibilities are not sharply delineated.

Mr Poots: The Committee will require further discussion on that matter, Chairman.

Mr D Bradley: Will schemes of employment under the ESA differ in any major ways from existing schemes that work, presumably, between the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and teachers, and between education and library boards and teachers?

Mr Stewart: It is not easy to provide direct read across with an existing scheme or approach. We could identify schemes of management as models to be followed in future. The concept of schemes of employment is relatively new; however, some of the content of what we are discussing is not. In the paper, I have tried to point out where practice exists. It is in legislation for controlled and maintained schools. Paragraph 9 of schedule 2 to the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 sets out in quite some detail the respective roles of education and library boards and boards of governors in employment matters.

We want to go at least that far, and further if we can, to place functions, autonomy and control firmly in the hands of boards of governors and restrict sharply the ESA's ability to do anything other than support and assist them to take that forward. Paragraph 9 of schedule 2 places those significant responsibilities in the hands of boards of governors, particularly for matters such as the suspension and dismissal of staff. Those are matters for boards of governors; and for them alone. We seek that level of autonomy in the draft scheme.

Mr D Bradley: Are those the major differences?

Mr Stewart: It is not a question of major differences, because at present there is not a simple before and after with which to make that comparison. There are not schemes of employment for all schools in the way that there will be when the legislation comes into effect. There is a range of approaches across various types of schools and sectors, some with more clarity than others. At present, the clearest model is for controlled and maintained schools as set out in schedule 2. The difference is that if we take that as our starting point, we want to go further: we want at least that level of autonomy for boards of governors, preferably greater.

Mr D Bradley: At present, the negotiating apparatus between teachers' unions and the Department is mediated through the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland. In future, will the ESA be the employment authority that will negotiate with trades unions on teachers' salaries?

Mr Stewart: Yes, and for non-teaching unions as well. There is already a collective negotiation arrangement between, on the one side, the teaching council and, on the other, current employers and employing authorities that act together in what is known as the "joint working party".

It is chaired by a representative from the voluntary grammar sector; so all the sectors, as employers, work together. In that sense, there is no change. The only change is that there will be one organisation rather than several, but there will be the same collective approach to trades union engagement.

Mr D Bradley: Will teachers' conditions of service be changed by the arrival of the ESA?

Mr Stewart: No; other than through the normal process of negotiation between trades union and employer. There is consistency in terms and conditions across all the sectors and school types, but there is not always consistency in their operation.

Mr D Bradley: I raised the concerns that Irish-medium schools have about maintaining their ethos, because, in most cases, their trustees do not own the schools; the boards of governors do. They are worried that a board of governors could change the status of a school without the trustees' blessing, and they want more powers to maintain the ethos of Irish-medium schools. Will that be provided for in the Bill?

Mr Stewart: It will be difficult to go further than we have in the Bill or beyond a possible amendment to "submitting authority". However, such an amendment would not deal with your concerns, because if a board of governors owns a school, changing the definition of "submitting authority" would make no appreciable difference.

I do not see much, if any, scope for us to restrict the day-to-day operation of a school in legislation. If the change was of such a profound nature that it required a development proposal, there would be a requirement to consult the trustees of a school and take their views into account. However, I do not claim that that would give the control or veto that they may be looking for in that case. I see no easy way of achieving that outcome in legislation.

Mr D Bradley: Will you write to me about it?

Mr Stewart: I will; I am conscious that a reply to you on that is long overdue, and I apologise.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 4 of page 147A of your paper states:

"The Department is considering a possible amendment to this clause".

When the Bill was being drafted, the perceived wisdom in the Department was that clause 3, as it

stood, was acceptable. Paragraph 4 goes on to give the reason for the Department's change of mind:

"to redefine the submitting authority in all cases as the owners or trustees of schools, with an option to delegate the functions to boards of governors. This reflects the views of a number of stakeholders, who suggested that school owners should be given the submitting authority role, so that they can ensure that the ethos of the school is reflected appropriately in the schemes of management and employment."

Will we be allowing schools' trustees to define whom they can and cannot employ on the basis of their ethos and not on the basis of the requirements of the school?

Mr Stewart: No is the short answer; no scheme of employment or management can be in contravention of education law or employment law. We will make it clear to any submitting authority, whether trustees or boards of governors, that it is proper for the ethos of a school to be reflected in its scheme of management and its scheme of employment, within the limits imposed by the law.

For example, it might be proper in a recruitment exercise to test candidates' knowledge and understanding of the ethos of a school, but it is not possible to limit unlawfully the eligibility of candidates outside that.

The Chairperson: What is the paramount importance for stakeholders? It seems that some sectors, which I will not name, are more interested in the preservation of their institutions than in delivering good education. Who are the stakeholders to whom the paper refers? Why does the Department feel that it is necessary to amend clause 3 now? I have not concluded whether I think that it is necessary to amend it.

Mr Stewart: Neither have we.

The Chairperson: When the Department brought the Bill to us, the perceived wisdom was that clause 3 was as it should be. However, due to the views of stakeholders, it seems that concerns on clause 3 have been raised.

Mr Stewart: I have no difficulty advising the Committee which stakeholders made the representations, because I am sure that they will make the same representations to the Committee if they have not already done so. The trustees of Catholic schools and the Irish-medium sector both wanted that change, because they wanted the employment scheme to reflect their educational ethos. In Irish-medium education, for example, a school's trustees and board of governors want to ensure that, in order to assess suitability for employment, candidates understand the immersion model of education that is provided in their school, how it operates, its intended benefits and how it delivers a quality education.

Similarly, the Catholic trustees made the point that Catholic education is not education for Catholics; rather, it is a form of education that reflects the

Catholic ethos. They expect to be able to — as they currently do — test candidates' knowledge and understanding of Catholic education. That does not mean that only practising Catholics are employed in Catholic schools. People in that sector often quote a particular example of a large Catholic post-primary school in which the principal is the clerk of session in his local Presbyterian church. On appointment, that candidate was tested, and the school was entirely satisfied that he understood and appreciated the ethos of Catholic education, the wider ethos of faith-based education and was capable of presiding over its delivery in the school.

Those representations have been made to the Department. They are not unreasonable, and we are minded to make the change. However, we have not reached a firm conclusion, and, I am sure that the Minister wants to know the Committee's views on that matter in order to help her decide.

Mr D Bradley: I forgot to ask a question about the employment issue. Will you discuss the sample schemes of employment with the teachers' unions?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

The Chairperson: I want to tease the issue out further. Is there any suggestion that the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education or the trustees will issue a legal threat if the legislation is not amended?

Mr Stewart: No, I am not aware of such a suggestion.

The Chairperson: I am concerned that the controlled sector, the Cinderella of education in Northern Ireland, is being left out on a limb and up in the air. Your submission states that "further consideration is required". Every time that the Committee discusses the controlled sector, officials use language such as "we are discussing", "we are looking at" and "we will consider". Nothing seems to happen proactively in a sector that comprises £2.3 billion of the estate and is the largest sector in educational provision in Northern Ireland. It always takes second place, and I am becoming concerned at how the controlled sector is being treated.

You mentioned two sectors, and I would love to not be in a situation where we must deal with so many sectors. However, some people have insisted for years that they must have the right to have their own sector. You said that the Department is considering amending clause 3, but we do not know what will happen in the controlled sector. Your submission states that:

"Further consideration is required on whether the submitting authority role ought to be assigned to the new ownership body for controlled schools".

We do not yet know how that body will look or what its membership will be. Moreover, we are not yet aware of the issues of the sectoral body, the support

body, the advocacy role and the ownership. That is yet another problem that is laid at the door of the controlled sector and is going nowhere.

Mr Stewart: I agree with almost all the points that you raised. However, I would not equate the need to address those issues and consider them carefully with putting the controlled sector in second place. You are right to raise the list of points that have yet to be determined about the ownership body. Given that Committee has not yet been given a clear picture of what the body will look like, it might well have been right to be concerned, if, this morning, I had said either that the decision was to give that role to the body or not to do so.

I raised the question in the paper because, if one followed the logic earlier in the paper without questioning it at all, one would assign that role to the controlled schools' ownership body. However, I raised the issue, and I invite the views of the Committee before we come to any conclusion, because we must consider whether that role would fit with the other functions that we want the body to discharge. The answer to that is not yet clear.

On the one hand, the body could be restricted to being very narrow and very technical, with little, if any, other function than that of ownership. On the other hand, it could have a broader range of functions, one of which might be ownership, and another of which might be the nomination of some governors. That would change the nature of the body quite significantly.

The Department has genuinely not yet reached a conclusion on that issue, and the earlier paper that set out those matters is still undergoing consultation. I do not want to give the impression that the Department regards those issues as unimportant, or does not want to address them expeditiously. We do, but we genuinely want to hear the Committee's views before we come to any conclusion.

The Chairperson: There are a lot of technical details involved, but a couple of questions must be answered: will the establishment of the ESA, the clauses making provision for employment schemes and the Bill in its entirety result in equality between the sectors in education? Or, will there still be sectors that, because the trustees own their own schools, or for a variety of other reasons, are able to enjoy a privileged position, but that still talk the language of equality even when it does not exist? I listen to people talking about equality, but that is not reflected in what we are hearing this morning, nor is it reflected in a lot of the other details of the Bill.

Mr Stewart: The Department's aim is to provide for exactly what you suggested: equality. We do not want any school or any sector to be in a disadvantaged position.

We will await the judgement of the Committee as to whether the legislation is achieving that. If the Committee feels that it is not, the Department will have to consider those issues very carefully.

There are differences, particularly between the controlled sector and the other sectors. Some of those differences are historical, and some are intrinsic to the nature of a set of publicly-owned schools, as opposed to privately-owned schools. The Department's task, and it is not always an easy one, but it is essential, is to ensure that that does not give rise to any sort of institutionalised inequality. If Committee members feel that we have not got it right yet or that there are issues that have not yet been dealt with, we are certainly open to suggestions and representations. Our aim is the same as yours. We want every school to be in a position in which the boards of governors feel that they are on a level playing field, and are not institutionally disadvantaged by the school type, school ownership or school sector, and certainly not by any aspect of the legislation.

The Chairperson: I apologise to Members for hogging the discussion, but there is another issue that I want to discuss. We were speaking earlier about the management scheme. Your submission states:

"The key point to emphasise is that this is a decision for the school. Each school, regardless of sector or type, should have the degree of autonomy that it wishes to have, and that matches its capacity."

What does that mean? It is a very well placed little line that was inserted by the authors of the paper, whoever they were, but what is the thinking behind it?

Mr Stewart: I assure you, on behalf of the author of the paper, that there is nothing sinister.

The Chairperson: I am reassured.

Mr Stewart: We hope that it is a pragmatic recognition of reality. Some schools, particularly the voluntary grammar schools, but also some of the larger Catholic maintained and controlled schools, indicated that they want the maximum level of autonomy, and said that they have a good and capable board of governors and that they want to do as much as they can, but with as little interference as possible from the ESA.

Nevertheless, it is likely that some smaller schools, and this is not a value judgement of them, will wish to have the option of leaving some of those matters in the hands of the ESA, which would act on their behalf, and that is a perfectly legitimate choice. In our submission, we attempted to emphasise that a school's level of autonomy ought to depend on the level of the capability of the governance of the school. Schools must make that judgement; not the ESA, which cannot be allowed to hand out autonomy as though it were a prize. Schools must decide what they are capable of doing and act accordingly. The ESA's primary job is

to support and advise schools, and when necessary, to challenge them.

Mr McCausland: I do not hold it against the Chairperson for hogging the questioning, because this matter is important and concerns about it must be hammered home. This session is getting to the heart of the issue.

There is a perception, which, in many ways, is valid, that the model is designed to suit the most vocal sectors. Consequently, we may end up with square pegs in round holes, and the controlled sector might be forced to adopt an inappropriate model. Therefore, we must pause for a while in order to thoroughly consider the implications of the proposals.

I do not wish the situation that was described by the Chairperson to arise; whereby, in effect, one sector has preference to, and an advantage over, another. If that were to be the case, the Bill will go nowhere — it will be dead in the water. Decisions taken now will stick for 30 or 40 years, so either we get it right now, achieving fairness and equality for everybody, or we must stick with what we have, because we are not moving. Those matters must be tied down, and we must tease out the implications, because a mountain of information can be buried in a single sentence.

Earlier, you gave an example of a scheme of employment, about which people must understand. Can you give some practical examples of how the ethos of a school might be reflected appropriately in its scheme of management, particularly with respect to the controlled sector?

Mr Stewart: I must confess that that question is difficult to answer. The examples that sectors have put to us tend to relate more to schemes of employment. The only honest answer that I can give is that I cannot think of a specific example in which a school's ethos would be specifically reflected in its scheme of management, other than, perhaps, in links between a scheme of management and a scheme of employment. As ever, the difficulty with the controlled sector is to ascertain what its ethos is. I do not believe that any ethos spans the entire sector. As we discussed previously, bringing an ethos into being is a challenge for the controlled sector's representative body.

Mr McCausland: In a sense, therefore, you are being asked to buy a pig in a poke, because, until that question is resolved, you will not know the practical outworkings. Without wishing to criticise you, that is an indictment of the present system.

In a way, there is an understanding of what the religious and cultural ethos of the controlled sector should be. Whether it actually delivers that is another matter. I am interested in the fact that it is difficult to come up with examples. It is clear cut. This is a huge issue for the maintained sector, and it is a huge issue

for the Irish-medium sector. We do not know about the controlled sector, although I think that some of us do know, but it is the issue of how that would work out in practice which is causing real concern.

Mr Stewart: We recognise the issue, and we recognise the concerns. However, there is absolutely no desire on the part of the Department to treat the controlled sector differently. The differences and challenges to be faced tend to arise from the fact that there is simply no tradition of operating in this particular way, because there never needed to be a tradition within that sector. It has been a publicly-owned sector which has been controlled and managed by education and library boards. Therefore, many of the issues of ethos or autonomy have, if you like, been dealt with on behalf of the schools by their parent bodies.

We are now trying to move to a situation in which schools have much more autonomy. However, that needs to be influenced, and contributed to, by sectoral and individual ethos. We are trying to create something within a sector that did not exist because there was no need for it. Clearly, there is a need for it now, for the reasons that Mr McCausland has given, which is to ensure that we have equality of treatment and opportunity. However, that is difficult, and it will take time. I do not claim to have a magic solution that I can bring to the Committee, and it would be wrong for me to do so. Nevertheless, we recognise the concern, and we will continue to work in that area to try to find a solution.

Mr McCausland: The phrase "it will take time" concerns me. That would, effectively, be like asking me to buy the pig in the poke. I will not be buying anything until those issues are tied down. It cannot be left until the end of the year in the hope that a working group will have created a structure. The matter needs to be sorted out now before any Bill goes through the Assembly.

Mr Stewart: I understand the concern. However, the Committee might be equally concerned if I were to come along and say that we had drawn up an ethos for the controlled sector over the weekend and that we are going to impose it. I am not certain that that sector, or anyone in it, would have much confidence that we would get it right the first time.

Mr McCausland: I have said on three or four occasions that if one considers the matter as a human-rights issue — the rights of the children — and an equality issue across sectors, it is not too difficult to work out the answer. The Department has been reluctant to do that.

Mr Stewart: I am intrigued as to what the answer is.

Mr McCausland: The Department has been reluctant to deliver on its obligations to children in the controlled sector.

The Chairperson: I am worried too that we may have a situation in which we have put the cart before the horse. We are being asked to buy-in to a structure that would allow the ESA to be the owner of the controlled estate — albeit that is not the preferred option for the Department — then, at some time when the issue has been sorted out and we have been able to get agreement, the ownership would be transferred to the body that would own the controlled sector. However, we are not sure as to what the relationship of that body would be to the controlled sector. There are far too many ifs and unknowns.

We also have two other sectors, the maintained sector and the Irish-medium sector, that have clearly said that clause 3 is unacceptable and has to be reworded. They have said that they have their ethos and want to maintain their identity and preserve who they are.

I concur with Mr McCausland's points. We want to ensure that the Bill leads to equality. However, there is not even equality in the way in which the different sectors are being treated in the process. The subgroup of six to eight people is not even established yet. That has to happen.

The point has been made on several occasions in this Committee that the controlled sector is starting at a very low base compared with other sectors, and it has a long way to go. However, judging by where we are now, the controlled sector does not have much time. A gun has been put to its head, and it is being told that it must get up to speed or else the ESA will look after everything. To be honest, no one in the controlled sector has any confidence that the ESA will look after their interests and provide for them. Those are serious questions to which we must have answers. When will the Department take seriously the issues that affect the controlled sector and inject equality into the process? To date, that has not happened.

Mr Stewart: I assure the Committee that the Department takes those matters seriously now. We want to address the issues that have been raised. It would be wrong of me to claim that I can address them in a matter of weeks; it will take time. Nevertheless, the timescale is not as stark as you have portrayed it, Chairperson. Yes, we want to ensure that come 1 January 2010, as the Committee has encouraged us to do, we do not leave the controlled sector lagging behind the others. However, that does not mean that by 1 January 2010 there has to be a sectoral ethos that is set in stone for ever. The ethos of that sector, like that of any other sector, will continue to develop and evolve as the sector itself continues to develop and evolve. Our job is to ensure that it has the capability and the capacity to do that.

As far as confidence in the ESA is concerned, I cannot comment on the views that people in the controlled sector might hold; they must do that for themselves. We are not asking them to have confidence in the ESA to represent them or advocate on their behalf; we want to ensure that people in that sector are able to do that for themselves. However, we want to ensure that the ESA understands all the sectors, treats them with equality, and discharges its functions in an efficient, effective and fair manner to all sectors. That is what we will aim to do in the legislation.

Mr McCausland: You can forget about 1 January 2010 unless you get this right. No one will vote for it in the Assembly.

Mr Stewart: We are all subject to the will of the Assembly. As I said, we wish to expedite this matter. We share the same aims and concerns as the Committee, and we are happy to work with you on the legislation. I am happy to take any particular suggestions that you have back to the Minister about how we might progress the issue. I am intrigued by the solution that you half-offered to me earlier; I would not mind hearing more about that.

Mr McCausland: It is a matter that I touched on several months ago, and I will come back to it again with you.

Mr B McCrea: It has been interesting listening to folk who have raised many of the concerns that I already voiced. As Edwin said, the problem is because you speak very nicely about things and you are such a nice chap, it would be hard to —

Mr Stewart: I hope that the Hansard report will record that as well.

The Chairperson: For the second time, Chris, yes.

Mr B McCrea: It strikes me that this is a sugar-coated poison pill. In all such issues, the devil is in the detail, and that is where the problems arise. Your submission states:

“In preparing schemes, submitting authorities must take into account any guidance produced by the ESA. Guidance does not carry the same weight as legislation, nor is there a requirement for absolute adherence. However, it cannot be unreasonably ignored.”

There is always a “however”. It goes on to say:

“The ESA may approve schemes, or modify them if they are not consistent with education law, or if they failed to take account of guidance.”

Despite all the smiles, and “don't worry, we trust you, it'll be OK”, when this Bill becomes law, it gives the ESA, driven by ministerial directive, carte blanche to do what it likes.

Mr Stewart: I disagree with you, and your interpretation of that. In the paper, I tried to convey the fact that guidance is guidance. It is not the same as legislation, and it is not the same as direction. Neither

the Department nor the ESA could, even if they wanted to, insist on any school following guidance to the letter. The test, if there needs to be a test in cases of dispute, is always one of reasonableness. A court would consider the actions of the ESA and of a board of governors to determine whether those actions are reasonable.

If we attempted to put something into guidance which was unreasonable, it would not stand. If we attempted to follow an interpretation of guidance that was unreasonable, it would not stand. If we attempted, unreasonably, to compel a board of governors to take a certain course of action, it would not stand, and it would have very clear and simple recourse to the courts to stop the ESA.

Courts take a very dim view of Departments or public bodies not understanding the limitations of their powers in relation to guidance. In the paper, I was simply trying to convey to the Committee that the Department understands the limitations of guidance and what it means in the circumstances.

Mr B McCrea: Are you familiar with the case of *Pepper v Hart*?

Mr Stewart: There is a response to that along the lines of: in the pubs and clubs of Antrim, they talk about little else. However, I am afraid that I am not familiar with that case.

Mr B McCrea: I invite you to consider the case of *Pepper v Hart* and the subsequent judgement made in the House of Lords in 2003 in the case of *Wilson and others v the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry*. The important issue that that judgement raised is about whether the deliberations — the words that come from people such as you or the proponents of Acts — form part of the overall Act.

We have talked about explanatory notes and guidance as being part of Bills, but in the final part of the notes that I have, and I will stand corrected, is that the object is to ascertain what the intention is as expressed by the words enacted. Guidance, explanatory notes, and warm words said in these Committee meetings and being chucked around in the Assembly count for nothing. Unless it is written down in the Bill and enacted, it has no validity. As the Chairperson said, there are far too many “ifs, buts, maybes” and “we will deal with this later” for us to pass anything that is in front of us.

I will say what the Chairperson has been too gentlemanly to say and I will take the for it. There is a concern that those from the maintained sector are worried about employing Catholics, because they think that it is part of their ethos. It could even be said that the Irish-medium sector wants to make sure that they employ people who agree with them and that that is the way forward. That may not be an unreasonable

position in itself, but we will reach a situation whereby we will have institutionalised inequality. The impression that one gets is that one side is governed by doing what is equal and fair, whatever that side is, and that the other side has got an advantage because it has carefully included things under the guidance of ethos. That will not stand.

The Department will have had submissions from people other than those who are in those sectors, including representatives from the governing bodies association (GBA), the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) and whomever, who will make it quite clear that the appointment of their teachers is central to them as well.

Unless we get firm detail, written down in a Bill — I am sorry, I cannot speak for the others — we are not going for this. I have expressed my reservations to you before, and I restate them for the record.

Mr Stewart: There were a number of points that I could respond to, but the theme running through the comments invites me to comment on the motivation of some of the sectors in the representations that they made. You will understand that I will not do so, because I am not in a position to do so.

In effect, you are arguing that the Department should move some of the detail of guidance and place it on the face of primary legislation in order to provide certainty. That is a perfectly reasonable argument, and it is one that the Assembly may wish to consider. We will follow the will of the Assembly in that regard.

I will not argue with your interpretation of the case law, because I have pleaded in defence to the Committee many times that I am not a lawyer. Certainly, the principles that we follow are as instructed to us.

A court will always consider the legislation first and foremost and use the interpretation of a normal and right-thinking individual. Where there is doubt, which can happen occasionally with even the best-drafted legislation, a court or tribunal will examine the proceedings in Parliament, or in this case the Assembly, to fathom its will when it passed the legislation.

When interpreting guidance, a court or tribunal will examine policy statements or utterances by officials or Ministers to determine the intention behind legislation. We cannot rely on the defence that what we might say to the Committee is different from what is in the guidance: if I make a comment about guidance, a court or tribunal can take that into account when interpreting what the guidance was intended to achieve.

Mr B McCrea: I invite you to check with your legal department, because a House of Commons standard note states that:

“Following the decision in *Pepper v Hart* in 1993, if primary legislation is ambiguous or obscure”,

— and we are making a fair stab at that —

“the courts may in certain circumstances take account of statements made in Parliament by Ministers or other promoters of a Bill in construing that legislation.”

The House of Lords contradicts that and says that what is enacted is the will of Parliament — or in our case the Assembly — and that is the issue. Chris, you can check those references.

We need detail, because the constructive ambiguity approach will not work; people do not trust the ESA. I am not being critical of the ESA’s objectives on efficiencies, but fundamental issues are emerging, and unless they are dealt with in the legislation, you will have difficulties with your deadline for the passing of the legislation.

Mr Stewart: I understand that, and I am relieved that we agree on the interpretation of the case law. You are saying that there is neither consensus nor trust on some of the detail appearing in guidance and that you want to see it appearing in primary legislation. If that is the will of the Assembly, it can be done, and you are right that it will have implications for the timescale of the legislation.

Mr B McCrea: I invited you to consider the case law before you say that we agree, because there was the case of *Wilson and others v Secretary of State for Trade and Industry* in 2003.

We want the detail in the primary legislation, because we want to know what everything means. Only then will the Bill have a chance of progressing.

Mr Stewart: I note the Committee’s views.

The Chairperson: It is welcome that we have a document from the Department that states:

“Guidance does not carry the same weight as legislation, nor is there a requirement for absolute adherence.”

That might be in contradiction to the perceived wisdom that exists about other guidance that will be issued over coming weeks.

Mr Stewart: I could not possibly speculate on what you might mean.

The Chairperson: However, we will not stray into that debate again today, but it is good to note that.

Mr D Bradley: The Minister announced a review of the education workforce after the classroom assistants’ dispute. Will that affect the work on employment schemes?

Mr Stewart: Not that I am aware of, although I am not familiar with the terms of reference of that review. I will check that and get back to you.

The Chairperson: The terms of reference for the review are set out at tab 4 of the Committee folder on page 155.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you.

The Chairperson: The next issue is the schemes of management. After that, we will address boards of governors, which is a huge issue; we will not curtail the discussion on that, so we may have to return to it.

Mr Stewart: Clauses 30 to 33 focus on schemes of management, which will be the central governance arrangements for all grant-aided schools.

The schemes of management will cover membership, the procedures of boards of governors, the day-to-day management of schools, the respective roles of boards of governors and principals and the composition and role of any committees of boards of governors that may be established.

The clauses are similar in wording and construction to clauses 4 to 7 on employment schemes, and they will operate in a similar way. There will be a requirement on schools to draw up schemes of management, having regard to guidance produced by the ESA, for the ESA to approve those schemes with or without modification and for the schools to follow the schemes as they are in place. That is similar to the effect of the legislation on schemes of employment, which, in this case, is not such a new phenomenon. Provisions are already in place in articles 9A to 9D of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which will be replaced by those provisions when the Bill is enacted.

The Chairperson: You referred to the provisions in articles 9A to 9D of the 1986 Order. How precisely do the new provisions in clauses 30 to 33 compare with the existing provisions? Are there any new provisions?

Mr Stewart: No. The wording may be slightly different, but the effect is very similar. There is no significant change in that area.

The Chairperson: We move to the issue of boards of governors, which is covered by clauses 34 to 36 and clauses 47 and 48. I remind members that we are not yet considering the clauses in detail; we will return to consider them individually. We want to consider the underlying policies that inform the clauses.

That is why, despite some members’ concerns, we wanted an extension to the Committee Stage; we wanted to ensure that we had enough time. Next week, I hope to provide the Committee with an outline of how we will consider the clauses. As yet, we do not have all the responses from those with whom we need to consult.

Mr Stewart: I am glad that you told me that today’s discussion was broad-brush rather than detailed.

Clause 34, on which we touched last week, stems directly from the Department's policy on raising standards, as set out in the 'Every School a Good School' policy. The clause aims to ensure that there are clear responsibilities throughout the education system, in this case on boards of governors, in relation to raising standards. The clause proposes two duties for boards of governors: the first is to exercise all their functions with a view to promoting high standards of achievement; the second is to co-operate with the ESA in the exercise of its functions in relation to raising standards.

I draw members' attention to the lack of the ESA's powers in that regard. There is no power for the ESA to direct boards of governors in relation to that duty or in the related matter of the exercise of their employment functions. As we discussed at last week's meeting, that reflects the policy of autonomous, self-improving schools, supported and challenged by the ESA but not directed or controlled by it.

Clause 35 amends the provisions on the composition of boards of governors of various types of schools. It is a long and difficult clause and a taxing read that will challenge anyone's powers of mental arithmetic. The net effect is, however, quite simple. Some governors are currently appointed by the Department or by the education and library boards, but, in future, those governors will be appointed by the ESA. That group of governors will be known as community governors, who are defined as:

"persons living or working in the local community".

The important point to emphasise is that the composition of boards of governors is otherwise unchanged. That includes the right of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) to choose governors for controlled schools.

Clause 36 merely removes the barrier on part-time teachers serving on boards of governors. Clause 47 is on different territory, and it relates to articles 17 and 18 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 on child protection.

Our aim is to ensure that there are clear duties and responsibilities on child protection throughout the education system, and also an effective means of enforcing those duties and responsibilities. It is, therefore, because of its significance, the only provision in the Education Bill, or indeed in existing legislation, that would give the ESA power to direct a board of governors.

Clause 48 is the companion to clause 47; it places a duty on boards of governors, and other education providers, to co-operate with the ESA in the discharge of its child-protection functions.

The Chairperson: Under clause 35, would governors, who were previously appointed by the Department and by the education and library boards, in future be appointed by the ESA? In light of our discussion about defining ethos, it seems that there is a defined ethos in the maintained sector and in the Irish-medium sector, but there is an obscure, bland, undefined ethos for the controlled sector.

Will the community governors have to be trawled for and considered as suitable candidates in the light of ethos as well, or will the sole criterion be that they live and work in their community? People who live and work in a local community could be as completely averse to the ethos of a school as I am to, I had better not give an example.

Mr Stewart: Hansard is listening, Chairman.

The Chairperson: There is a worry that such people will be appointed. If there was a legal challenge to an appointment that had been made at political or ministerial direction, the courts could say that since the appointment was competent under law there was nothing that they could do to change it — because the law is vague and ill defined.

Some people could be appointed to the board of governors of a school solely because they are being directed by a political aspiration to influence and change the nature, ethos, direction and decisions of that school. That would create confusion and confrontation in the boardrooms of schools where, to date, there has been harmony. Despite all the challenges and difficulties, there has been no problem with the people who sat around the governors' table.

Mr Stewart: We agree entirely. We must prevent such a situation. The only formal requirement in the legislation is the one that you pointed to: the definition of community governors. However, in future, as at present, when applying to serve as governors, applicants are asked to indicate the school or type of school in which they wish to serve. Where possible, an attempt is made to match preference, and there is always, and will continue to be, a legal requirement for consultation with schools when governors are being appointed to ensure that there is no disharmony.

It is not the Department's intention to do anything other than appoint governors who have an understanding of, and an empathy with, the ethos of the schools to which they are appointed, and, beyond that, to appoint them on the basis of their capability and competence to run a school effectively and to discharge a very important public service.

I recognise your concerns; they have been expressed to the Department by every sector on that issue. I say to those sectors what I say to the Committee, as well as telling them that the Department could make such appointments now if it wished, since the Department

and the education and library boards appoint governors to schools. If the Department had an improper purpose in mind, it could be achieved at present just as easily as in future. However, we have no improper purpose in mind.

The Chairperson: A Bill should be about getting things right and addressing problems and deficiencies that have been experienced in the past. The issue involves every school whether controlled, maintained, Government-maintained and integrated. How difficult would it be to amend clause 35(2)(c)? That is essentially the nub of the matter. That clause states:

“ ‘community governors’, in relation to a school, means persons living or working in the local community;”.

Surely it would not be difficult to amend that clause to reflect the Department’s intention. The Department’s intention, no matter how good, is not worth the paper that it is written on if it is not in the Bill. We will not be convinced that that intention will be fulfilled unless we see it in the Bill. Some thought should be given to how clause 35 can be amended to reflect the Department’s intention and the worries of every sector.

Mr Stewart: We are happy to work with the Committee on proposals to amend or expand the definition. It would be an unusual legislative approach to state what a Bill will not do; Legislative Counsel would advise us that that is not a necessary step. However, we are more than happy to consider other dimensions that you feel ought to be reflected in the definition.

The Chairperson: The Department has concerns about clause 11, and amendments will be made to it. Yet, despite all the worries that have been expressed, the Department seems to have no concerns about clause 35. The Department seems happy not to consider amendments. You received a roasting, to put it mildly, from two sectors about clause 35.

Mr Stewart: We have been roasted by all sectors. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: They have not all started yet; they are only warming up. It seems as though the Department will not consider doing anything about the issues that have been raised in respect of clause 35 unless they are raised by the Committee.

Mr Stewart: The difference is that some sectors suggested a beneficial change to clause 11; we did not consider the suggestion to be unreasonable, and it is one that we are keen to consider. Several sectors expressed genuine concern about clause 35, but there is no evidence that what they fear is happening, even though it could happen under present legislation. There is no evidence to support change.

We are happy to consider any other dimensions that the Committee feels ought to be reflected in the

definition of community governor. The challenge in drafting legislation is to be precise in what one is trying to define. It would be very difficult, indeed, almost impossible, to use the word “ethos” as a definition in the Bill, because ethos is an extremely difficult concept to define, measure or test in court. We do not want to end up with imprecise legislation such as the case law to which Basil referred.

The Chairperson: With all respect, it is not difficult to do it with employment schemes: clause 3 states that there will be a change of ethos. It seems that one can have a definition in an employment scheme but not in a Bill.

Mr Stewart: There are clear differences between employment schemes and Bills. Legislation requires a unique degree of precision and clarity in the meaning of words and phrases; that precision simply does not exist anywhere else. It will be extremely difficult to arrive at a definition of “ethos” that can be included in legislation.

Mr McCausland: In the Catholic sector, the committee for appointing boards of governors is simply given a list. The choices are predetermined; they do not pick one person out of a choice of 10; they are told whom to choose. The Catholic Church thereby ensures that the ethos of its sector is guaranteed. We are simply saying that the ethos of schools in the controlled sector must be guaranteed — and I am sure that we will get that sorted out — as it is in the Catholic sector.

There is an issue about the balance of representation on boards of governors. Churches have largely withdrawn from some inner-city areas of Belfast, and I do not think that that has happened elsewhere, in which schools in the controlled sector are situated. Often, the appointment of a Church representative to a school’s board of governors in such an area is made for historical reasons, namely that a church was located there 70 years ago. As a result, a bizarre situation occurs whereby Church representatives, none of whom lives within 10 or 20 miles of a school, sit on an inner-city school’s board of governors. The church building no longer exists, but the representatives of that Church make decisions about a school.

I could live with that if only one Church representative were allowed to sit on a board of governors. However, the difficulty arises when several transferor representatives are allowed to do so, because they can become a substantial element on a board of governors. For example, Church representatives on the board of governors of a school in Belfast drove through a fundamental decision. Can you clarify the number of transferor representatives permitted to sit on a board of governors? My understanding is that it varies from school to school.

Mr Stewart: That is correct. The sums can be complicated.

Mr McCausland: It is important that the transferor Churches have their place and want to protect it. However, as has been pointed out before, there are other Churches in the Protestant community. An historical peculiarity should not act as a block to override others.

They seem to have an automatic in-built majority on everything. That probably applies only to schools in inner-city Belfast, because, in the countryside, the same church might have served its community for the past 200 years. Given changes in demography, however, that issue should be examined.

Mr Stewart: I am sure that you are not inviting us to remove the TRC's right to nominate governors.

Mr Elliott: Just the Presbyterian ones.

Mr McCausland: As I am not a Presbyterian, a Free Presbyterian nor any sort of Presbyterian, I have no view on that. The system needs to be thought through, as people could be making legislation without being fully aware of anomalies that can arise. As you rightly assumed, I totally support the right of the transferors; however, it needs to be monitored in one area.

Mr Stewart: That is a valid point, and it emphasises the importance of the role of community governors, as defined. The role of the Transferor Representatives Council is important, and we have always acknowledged that. It was never our intention to remove or dilute in any way the TRC's vital participation. At any one time, the TRC provides us with some 2,000 school governors whom we simply could not replace.

You are right, however, that there are other voices in the controlled sector that must be heard, and that is why the theme running through what we are attempting to do with boards of governors, particularly with the representatives' council, is to ensure that those schools have a connexion with and understand the needs of the communities that they serve. If that connections, which in the past was through the Churches, no longer exists, we must find different routes and connexions between schools and the communities that they serve.

It can often be difficult and challenging to get sufficient numbers of people to serve as school governors. Therefore, the Churches, Protestant and Catholic, have a vital role in persuading people to put their names on lists for consideration.

Mr McCausland: One of the strengths of the Catholic maintained sector is the close association between the parish and the school. The representatives who come forward are imbedded in the community; they probably grew up there, worship there and belong to that community. We must find ways to ensure the

same rootedness for boards of governors in the controlled sector.

Mr Stewart: I agree entirely; it is a particularly difficult challenge in some inner-city areas.

Mr B McCrea: There is a gaping hole in what you are attempting to do. The appointment of governors is central to the development of autonomous, self-improving schools. Most former governors to whom I speak will not go back, for although we burden them with responsibilities we fail to give them clear guidance and support. We must find a better way to deal with the matter.

You say that you seek proposals from us to encourage people to become governors again. What do you mean by consultation with existing governors? How can an existing board of governors be consulted to ensure that new governors are acceptable?

Mr Stewart: Quite simply by sharing the names with them and inviting their opinions.

Mr B McCrea: What happens when they yes or no, or "we'd rather have Jimmy."?

Mr Stewart: It would depend on the representations that had been made. If a board of governors were to point out to us that the ESA had made a gross error by suggesting someone who is fundamentally opposed to a school's ethos, we would, of course, think again. However, having spoken to the various sectors and to boards of governors, I am assured that that does not happen under the present arrangements. Nevertheless, although the sectors and boards of governors are satisfied with the outcomes of departmental and, indeed, education and library board appointments to their schools, they are glad that the consultation process exists as a safeguard.

Mr B McCrea: That was then, and this is now. For a long time, education involved relatively little politics with a small "p"; it was administered either by direct rule or there was consensus on the way forward. Nowadays, we are having probably the most highly contested discussion about education since 1921; people have fundamentally different opinions.

If governors, and not the ESA, are to lead the charge in schools, whoever appoints governors will determine the stance that schools take. Given the disagreements resulting from the various, although legitimate, political agendas, people will be appointed to boards of governors for various reasons. If governors, rather than the ESA, taking the lead is to be the cornerstone of the new arrangements, you must consider the matter in more detail and come to us with schemas for how things should work.

Incidentally, when we attempt similar balancing exercises for district policing partnerships, we are inundated with people who want to get involved.

There are mechanisms set up to ensure that a balance is achieved. I am not saying that we have to do it that way, but we should consider it.

There are similar examples in the Health Service of getting different representatives involved. If we are keen to get local people involved in the ESA, we will have to find a way of achieving that. It is a challenge for you, and you will need to come back to it. The situation with boards of governors is not working.

Mr Stewart: We have 1,251 grant-aided schools, and that means that we have approximately 10,000 school governors. The challenge for the ESA and others is to find 10,000 willing and capable people to serve, in an important voluntary capacity, this important public service. Even if we wanted to introduce political vetting for school governors, I am not certain that we could.

Of those 10,000 governors, some will support some aspects of education policy at any given time, and some will have different views on aspects of education policy at any given time, and that may vary over time. We are interested in the capacity of those individuals to lead and manage the schools.

Mr B McCrea: I understand your Civil Service approach, but the same will happen with the ESA as happened in such groups as the district policing partnerships in which organisations and political parties encouraged their activists to get involved. That is right and proper, but it has the potential to politicise an issue. You may not do it, but that does not mean that it does not happen.

You said that there had not been problems before and that it worked out all right. The challenge in framing legislation is that, in the future, other Ministers or other people may take a contrary view. There is significant alarm among the governors throughout the entire school estate, irrespective of sector, about what they are being asked to do. Unless that is sorted out, we will run into the sand on the issue.

There is no point in our coming backwards and forwards; we will not sort it out here and now, but you should realise that there needs to be a more detailed approach to how school governors of all sorts are appointed, selected and encouraged. The Department should focus its attention on that.

I close on the issue that has returned about the ambiguity and fudge. Paragraph 27 of the submission relates to clause 34. It states:

“The clause will place two duties on boards of governors: to exercise their functions with a view to promoting high standards of achievement; and to co-operate with the ESA in the exercise of its functions in relation to raising standards”.

I cannot see a problem with the first point, but what does the second point mean? What is the definition of “to co-operate with the ESA”? What does “co-operate” mean in that context?

Mr Stewart: In the past, some schools have refused to co-operate with the Education and Training Inspectorate and education and library boards. Some schools have refused to allow representatives from the education and library board to be present at meetings with the Education and Training Inspectorate to discuss the outcome of school inspections. It is that refusal to co-operate that we need to address through the duty that has been proposed.

Mr B McCrea: That is a reasonable condition, but one could also interpret “co-operate” to mean that ESA will, gently, tell schools what it expects them to do and that their co-operation would be appreciated. In other words, schools will have to do what the ESA tells them to do.

Mr Stewart: There are no powers for the ESA — and that does not constitute a power for the ESA — to direct a board of governors. We do not expect that the ESA’s first approach will be to gently ask the schools to do as it says. Its first approach should be to gently ask the schools what they propose to do. If that answer is not satisfactory, the ESA may consider taking further action or ask the Department to take further action.

I want to be clear on this matter: the ‘Every School a Good School’ policy gives no strong or draconian powers to the ESA. The strongest powers, such as the ability to change schools, close schools and remove boards of governors, are in existing legislation and rest with the Department. There are no proposals to place those powers with the ESA.

Mr B McCrea: That is exactly my point. It is smoke and mirrors. You say that the powers lie with the Department rather than the ESA. However, it is not inconceivable that the ESA will say that it is having difficulties with a particular school, whereupon the Department will exercise its powers. The Committee received many submissions from people who are concerned about the potential for micromanagement by the Department or the ESA. You may understand the difference in structural issues, but, frankly, people do not see it.

I fear that you need to examine the legislation in more detail. If what used to be called education and library boards and the inspectorate should combine, we have to outline their responsibilities. I know that it requires much labour, and I know that it is not easy. However, in the current climate, you will have to adopt that approach.

Mr Stewart: I understand that point. On your earlier point, you face the dilemma that every legislator faces: too much power or too little power.

The concern has been the lack of clarity of responsibility of standards and powers throughout the education system. In the past, the Department's significant powers have not been used to address the worst-performing schools.

In the past, our approach has been based on providing additional resources and giving schools an inordinately long time to address the serious issues that they face. Meanwhile, one or more cohorts of children pass through those schools and are failed by the education system. We aim to move to a different situation in which responsibilities and powers are clear and in which there is scope for a graduated response that begins with help, support and advice but, in the most extreme circumstances, can result in the prompt closure of a school.

Mr B McCrea: What is the inspectorate's role?

Mr Stewart: The inspectorate is the key driver. Any such decisions must be evidence-based, and the Education and Training Inspectorate is the primary provider of evidence.

The Chairperson: The inspector will make a presentation, which will cover clause 37, on his report to the Committee. We will seek the inspector's views on the matter.

Mr Elliott: Chris said that the powers that lie with boards of governors and the Department will remain there in order to maintain the status quo. That is completely different to what the Committee was led to believe a couple of weeks ago about community planning. I thought that more functions, such as community planning, would move to the centre of the ESA. We can, if necessary, check the Hansard report. However, there was an emphasis that decisions on community planning could be taken by the ESA above the heads of boards of governors. Is that accurate?

Mr Stewart: Do you mean area planning of curriculum and the educational estate?

Mr Elliott: Yes.

Mr Stewart: We draw a distinction between the running of individual schools, which is, under our policy, a matter for boards of governors, and the planning of education, where we want to move away from the separate sectoral or individual school approach to planning that we have adopted in the past. We will move to a much more planned and managed market. The ESA will be the planning authority for education. However, even at present, any development proposal for a new school, a school closure or a change in the character of a school is decided by the Department and the Minister. In that sense, it is not a change.

Mr Elliott: Your submission says that child protection is the only subject in the Bill on which the ESA will have the power to direct boards of governors.

Where does the responsibility lie if there a misdemeanour, or if something untoward takes place? Does the responsibility for the child protection issue lie with the board of governors or with the ESA?

Mr Stewart: Clauses 47 and 48 do not change the responsibility. The duty and responsibility that goes with them rests firmly with the board of governors. The point of the clauses is to introduce a policing function to ensure that those duties are properly discharged. Our concern was that it was not sufficient to have clarity of responsibility. That, in itself, does not stop things from going wrong, and, if something were to go wrong, it would not be sufficient to come along afterwards and have an easy and effective means of apportioning blame. Therefore, we need the means to ensure that things do not go wrong in the first place. That is why we felt that it was appropriate to give the ESA strong powers to direct the board of governors in that respect.

Mr Elliott: I have a concern. You will appreciate that although the power is moved to the ESA, the responsibility does not move to it. The responsibility remains with the board of governors. If the powers move, why does the responsibility not also move?

Mr Stewart: It would not be feasible to transfer the responsibility of the board of governors for the day-to-day running of a school to the ESA, unless we wanted to go down a road that was contrary to the policy that we are pursuing, which is to give schools much less autonomy, or rather, no autonomy, and for the ESA to have much more centralised control. A number of members have impressed upon me that they do not want that to happen.

Mr Elliott: We are talking about the one issue, which is child protection. I do not see why that issue should not be separated, as you have separated other issues for direction from the ESA.

Mr Stewart: The issue relates to the way in which the school carries out its daily business, the policies and procedures that it has in place for access to children and young people — supervised and unsupervised — and the level of training and understanding that staff may have. Those matters are a school's responsibility, and they are in the day-to-day control of the board of governors. In that sense, it would not be feasible or desirable to try to move that to the ESA. However, it is important that the ESA is in a position to ensure and challenge a board of governors, where necessary, in relation to the discharge of those responsibilities, and, more importantly, to provide the advice, help, support and guidance that goes along with that. That is why there is the corresponding duty on the ESA in relation to child protection.

The Chairperson: We will have to examine that issue again in more detail.

Do you see any problem with the body that will be established to own the controlled sector nominating governors, rather than the Department, or what would have formerly been the board? Aligned to that, comments were made earlier in relation to getting equity. How do you see that being played out in the maintained sector or in any other sector? In the provision, all schools are being treated the same with the appointment of community governors, and the only requirement will be that they live and work in the local community. That applies to all schools.

Mr Stewart: That is taking us into slightly different territory. It is what we referred to in policy papers as “foundation governors” who might be appointed or chosen by owners of schools to represent the ethos and character of a particular school. In the policy paper, we floated a suggestion that the controlled schools ownership body might be given a role in that respect. Again, it is asking whether we should follow without question the logic that would run throughout the rest of the arrangements and draw the equivalence between that body and the owners of schools in other sectors.

There are two sets of issues with that. One is whether we — and, we, in this case, is the Assembly — wish that body to have merely the narrow role of ownership and stewardship over physical assets, or whether we wish it to have a broader range of functions of which that might be one. The difficulty with that, which relates to the point that Nelson made, is that it will be a statutory public authority. The issue is the extent to which, under legislation, we can make the body as representative, as some members may wish, of the communities and schools with which it deals, bearing in mind the clear restrictions on the legislative competence of the Assembly in section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Chairperson: To clarify, are you saying that that is not preferable?

Mr Stewart: I am asking the question and inviting members to give their views. For example, a statutory non-departmental public body might be established to take ownership of the controlled schools estate. We could not give the TRC or any other particular group of churches, for example, guaranteed representation on that body’s membership. That is the same difficulty that we ran into with the TRC’s nomination rights on governors. The Assembly simply could not pass legislation to that effect. The Speaker would not admit it to the House. It is beyond the Assembly’s legislative competence.

We solved that problem with governors by leaving existing legislation intact. However, we could not constitute the controlled schools’ ownership body in

the way that education and library boards are currently constituted with guaranteed TRC participation. Of course, that does mean that they would be excluded. TRC representatives could be there, having been appointed through a typical public-appointments merit-based process. We cannot make that body representative of any particular community or sector in the way that Nelson would like it to be. We simply do not have the legislative means to do so.

Mr McCausland: Would there be any difficulty, therefore, in having a body that is representative of the community that it serves?

Mr Stewart: I think that there would be difficulty.

The Chairperson: Do you mean that there would be difficulty in making recommendations for the appointment of community governors?

Mr Stewart: Sorry, I may have misunderstood your question.

Mr McCausland: Is there a legislative difficulty in having a body — either the ownership body or the sectoral body — that is representative of the community that is served by those schools?

Mr Stewart: Not with regard to the representative body, because it is not statutory. There would be difficulty with any statutory body.

Mr McCausland: What is required legislatively at Westminster in order to put that right?

Mr Stewart: A change to section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 would be required.

Mr McCausland: What is the timescale for such a change? Unless there is that change, the matter cannot go anywhere.

Mr Stewart: I am not sure that the timescale is the issue; it is political agreement.

Mr McCausland: The point is, of course, that without political agreement to meet that requirement, there might be a Bill, but there will be no Act. The Minister tells us about equality until we are sick hearing about it. There must be equality for everyone or equality for no one. If ownership of the Catholic sector is in the hands of a body that is represented fully by that community, ownership of controlled schools must reside in a body that represents the community that is served by those schools.

Mr Stewart: Unsurprisingly, the Catholic community is reflected fully in that body because the schools are in the ownership of the Roman Catholic Church. There is a difference between any church and a statutory public authority. We simply do not have the legislative means to make any statutory public authority representative of any one particular section of society.

The Chairperson: Let us be honest, Chris; although they may not know all the details, the public are wise on the issue. They cannot get their heads around the fact that schools in the maintained sector, which receive 95% to 98% — I stand to be corrected — of their funding from public money, have a privileged position, while schools in the controlled sector, which is funded by public money, are subject to certain rules and regulations just because they did not insist on being treated differently in the past. If the aim is to get equality, that is a driving point. The agenda that has been set by the Minister is one of equality, and I can tell you that that is what we will end up having.

Mr Stewart: I understand the issue, but it is one for political debate and discussion, and not for me to answer. The issue for the Department is quite simply the difference in legislation between a private body and a public authority.

Mr McCausland: I accept the fact that it would require political agreement, but could a paper be provided that outlines the process by which that could be achieved, so that we get an indication of the timescale that is required for that legislation. That would then give us better information about when the Bill might potentially become law.

Mr Stewart: If you are asking for advice on how you might secure an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, that takes us into territory that is the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and is well beyond the remit of the Department of Education.

Mr McCausland: I am simply asking for a paper that outlines the practicalities.

Mr Stewart: It may be a very short paper.

Mr McCausland: That may be; it might only be three or four lines.

Mr Stewart: The Committee might find that refreshingly different.

Mr McCausland: I am making the point that this is a fundamental issue; there is no running away from it. There is no point in our proceeding with this; we would be wasting our time unless that matter can be resolved.

Mr Stewart: I note Nelson's point, and if there is advice that we can provide on that we will do so. However, as I said, it is well beyond the competence of the Department of Education. We can, though, provide advice on where you might get further advice.

Mr D Bradley: The situation that we are in today is partly due to historical circumstances. When Lord Londonderry was the Minister of Education, he wanted all schools to be state schools, and it was the Presbyterian Church that was most strongly opposed to that at the beginning. The transferors at one stage obviously saw

an advantage in handing their schools over to the public authority. People may now see that as disadvantageous, but it is part of the history and evolution of education in Northern Ireland.

There are now integrated schools in the controlled sector, I believe that there are one or two controlled Irish-medium schools, and there are controlled schools that are integrated because of demographics.

The Chairperson: There are controlled schools that are predominantly attended by Roman Catholic children.

Mr D Bradley: We are not talking about a homogenous group; that probably makes issues more difficult.

There was a situation in my constituency in which a senior manager of a school was behaving in a way that was detrimental to the good running of the school. It took an extremely long time for that person to be suspended under the present system. His presence in the school over that prolonged period did irreparable damage to the health of some of the staff in the school, as well as to the good running of the school and the education of the pupils.

Under the new legislation, when boards of governors have those powers, is it your view that if someone should be suspended, as was the case in that situation, that that will happen much quicker than it has happened in many cases under the present system?

Mr Stewart: It is difficult for me to comment on particular cases without knowing the circumstances. I do appreciate that such situations can take an inordinate length of time to resolve. I cannot guarantee that the process will be any quicker or any slower under the new arrangements, because I suspect that it is driven primarily by the requirements of employment law rather than education law.

Any board of governors or any principal faced with that situation will want to be able to act quickly, decisively and within the law and parameters of best human-resource management practice at the given time.

In such situations, the role of the ESA will be vital, and the service that it provides to schools must be timely, professional and on hand. Clear advice must be available on tap to boards of governors, so that they know what they can and cannot do, and how quickly that can be achieved.

The Chairperson: There may be a few follow-up questions. Thank you, Chris. Jeff and Peter had an easy run this morning.

Mr Stewart: They will have to carry me out now.
[Laughter.]

The Chairperson: Thank you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

4 March 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

Mr Jeff Brown	}	Department of Education
Mr Peter Burns		
Mr Chris Stewart		

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr D Bradley): Good morning, gentlemen: You are welcome back. The session will have three parts. The first will be on clauses 1 and 2, the education and skills authority (ESA) and its functions and general duty. The second will deal with clause 9 and schedule 2, namely the transfer of staff. The third part will be about clause 22 and schedules 3, 4 and 5, namely the transfer of assets. I invite Chris to introduce his team and to outline how he intends to deliver the briefing.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): Thank you, Chairman, and good morning, members. With me today are Jeff Brown and Peter Burns from the review of public administration Bill team. If it meets with your approval, we will make three short presentations covering the material. We will pause for questions between each presentation.

As members will have noticed, I am coughing and spluttering, so I hope that my voice will hold out until the first difficult question, at which point it will probably give up on me.

Clause 1 will establish the education and skills authority as a public authority. The associated schedule

1 contains the range of standard provisions that one would expect for a new public authority. They cover the status, membership, employees, governance arrangements and proceedings, and the finance and accountability arrangements for the organisation.

Schedule 1(2) deals with the membership of the ESA, or what is commonly referred to as its board, and members will be aware that most members of the ESA will be district councillors. The appointment arrangements will involve a merit-based application process that will reflect the principles and the guidance issued by the Commission for Public Appointments.

Schedule 1(7) and 1(8) provide the power to establish committees, including those that will be associated with the local units or teams of the ESA. Members will note that the provisions give the ESA the power to delegate functions to those committees or to employees of the organisation.

Schedule 1(19) deals with the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975; its effect is that MLAs may not be members of the ESA. That stems from the need to avoid the potential for a conflict of interest, given that the organisation will be accountable to the Minister and to the Assembly.

Schedule 1(20) and 1(21) apply a range of fairly standard regulatory frameworks that members would expect to see applied to any public authority. For instance, the provisions will bring the ESA within the remit of the Commissioner for Complaints and within the ambit of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. As a result of being within the ambit of the legislation relating to the Commissioner for Complaints, the ESA will be a public authority for equality purposes and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It will, automatically, be a public authority for the purposes of the Human Rights Act 1998, because it comes under the definition in that Act.

Overall, the provisions in schedule 1 are similar to those of schedule 1 in the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. There are a few differences, which we have summarised for members in the annex to the paper, but we do not regard any of them as being particularly significant.

Clause 2 defines the functions and the general duty of the ESA. Clause 2(1) is linked to the repeals and amendments in the Bill and will assign to the ESA those functions in existing legislation that lead to transfer from existing bodies, as well as new functions that are defined elsewhere in the Bill.

Clause 2(2)(a) and 2(2)(b) are significant, because they provide an overarching statement, or mission statement, of the purpose of the ESA. They focus on six key dimensions in the development of children and young people: spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual, and physical. They also focus on the three

main forms of education: early-years services, which are referred to in the Bill as “educational services”; schools; and youth services.

The key differences from the current legislation are the addition of the social dimension of development and the more explicit recognition of early years and youth services as key components of education.

The Department is considering a possible amendment to clause 2(2)(b) on youth services. On reflection, we do not think that that clause goes far enough or that its language is sufficient in reflecting explicitly the links between youth services and the various dimensions of development as the provisions for schools and early years do.

We may, therefore, propose a redraft in a similar fashion and using similar language to that in clause 2(2)(a), which deals with early years and schools.

Members may ask why we simply do not collapse the two provisions together and add youth services to clause 2(2)(a). However, there is a technical reason why we cannot do that. It would be extremely difficult well nigh impossible — because of the age ranges of the services that are provided.

Primary and secondary education are provided for children and young people, who, as a result of a couple of definitions in legislation, includes individuals up to the age of 19. By contrast, the age range for youth services is not defined in legislation, but, in practice, includes people up to the age of 25.

For that reason, it would be extremely difficult to combine all those services in one clause. Moreover, the clause assigns to the ESA several other key overarching functions, including planning and education in clause 2(2)(c), supporting and challenging education providers in clause 2(2)(d), and providing advice to the Department in clause 2(2)(e). Clause 2(3) will place a requirement on the ESA to treat all schools equitably. That duty aims to address the concerns expressed by members and stakeholders that the ESA might experience a conflict of interest during the period when it owns controlled schools.

Clause 2(4) will place a duty on the ESA to raise standards and will complement the duty on boards of governors in clause 34, which the Committee discussed last week. Clause 2(5) and 2(6) provides for the ESA to carry out administrative functions under the direction of the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. At the moment, neither Department has specific proposals in mind, but that clause is included in case we need the ESA to do some heavy lifting on our behalf. Clause 2(8) provides the definition of educational services, which is shorthand for early-years provision.

The Deputy Chairperson: Schedule 1(2)(1) provides for the ESA board to consist of a chairperson and not fewer than seven or more than 11 other members. Does that number provide for the scope of expertise that will be needed to hold the ESA to account?

Nelson and I are members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which has been examining the aftermath of the collapse of the Northern Ireland Events Company and how the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure should ensure that its arm’s-length bodies are accountable. Part of that process involves ensuring that people on the boards of those bodies have adequate skills, expertise and training to ensure that they can perform their functions properly. Some people might describe the numbers as smallish. Might it confine the degree of expertise or could it be difficult to find the range of skills and expertise that are needed to hold such a large organisation to account?

Mr Stewart: I understand and agree with your point: experience, skills and expertise are very important. The Department thinks that that number strikes the right balance between manageability and, as you rightly emphasised, securing the necessary breadth of skills, competence and experience.

As your question suggested, quality is as important as the number of members on the ESA’s board. For that reason, the Department is clear that the merit principle will feature strongly in the appointment arrangements. We have stressed in the legislation the need to appoint members who have knowledge and experience in education and its various dimensions. We understand your point, and I will relay it to the Minister. We think that the current number is right, but the Minister will want to consider the Committee’s opinion.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has established a review team. Part of its remit is to ensure that people, such as those who will comprise the ESA board, who accept positions of responsibility are properly trained. Why will most of its members will be councillors? Will it be possible to reconcile that with the Bill’s requirement for each member to have experience in a field of activity that is relevant to the discharge of the ESA’s functions?

Mr Stewart: Yes, because the latter point is not an absolute requirement; rather, it is an aim that we will strive to realise. The fundamental reason why most board members will be district councillors is the Minister’s desire to ensure local democratic accountability in the organisation. That proposal was strongly supported in several stakeholders’ consultations.

There was no support for establishing the ESA as a quango, and there was widespread support for democratic accountability and for elected representatives being part of the membership.

The Deputy Chairperson: You also said that part of the duty of the ESA will be to contribute to the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual and physical development of children. How do you define “spiritual” and “social”?

Mr Stewart: They are not explicitly defined in the Bill, and it would be very difficult to do so. The spiritual dimension is not new; it is reflected in current legislation. The new aspect is the social dimension. The Department aims to achieve a recognition of the breadth of purpose of education; it focuses not merely on the intellect, but on the education of the whole person and on every aspect and facet of their development. We do not propose to define those terms, as it would be difficult to do so. They would mean what one would expect the ordinary, right-thinking person in the street to understand them to mean.

The Deputy Chairperson: Does that not leave those terms open to interpretation?

Mr Stewart: It does, but if ever there is a dispute over interpretation, a court would consider what is reasonable in the circumstances.

The Deputy Chairperson: Clause 2(4) states:

“ESA shall ensure that its functions relating to grant-aided schools are (so far as they are capable of being so exercised) exercised with a view to promoting the achievement of high standards of educational attainment.”

What is the purpose of the caveat

“so far as they are capable of being exercised”?

Mr Stewart: That is one of those provision to which there may be less than meets the eye. The ESA will have a range of functions: providing support and training for governors and staff to running its staff canteen. There is not much that it can do to contribute to the high standards of attainment through running its staff canteen.

Mr B McCrea: Chris, I am disappointed in all this. Paragraph 14 of your submission states:

“Clause 2(4) will place a duty on the ESA in relation to raising standards, and is intended to be complementary to the duty on boards of governors”.

There is an equivalence there; in other words, the ESA can come in and deal with things.

Your submission states that the Bill provides for the ESA to carry out administrative functions at the direction of the Department. Who defines administrative? That could mean anything, including staff issues.

There is little point in my labouring the issue. I have tried over the past weeks to tell the Department where I thought reasonable compromises could be made; however, I see none. I would like to place on the record that we are implacably opposed to a Trojan horse. This is not about education; it is about ministerial control.

Although it is slightly contentious, I would like to make a comment about page 159 of the Department’s submission.

Mr O’Dowd: Chairman, are we discussing the presentation or are we discussing Basil’s interpretation of the presentation?

The Deputy Chairperson: There are issues that he wants to raise.

Mr O’Dowd: There are three presentations on the various clauses.

The Deputy Chairperson: Mr McCrea is still discussing clause 1 and schedule 1.

Mr B McCrea: I am referring to clause 1, schedule 1, on page 159 of the Committee’s briefing, if that helps, Mr O’Dowd.

The Deputy Chairperson: Basil, it would be helpful if you referred to the paragraph of the submission.

Mr B McCrea: OK. Paragraph 19 deals with Assembly disqualification, and paragraph 2 deals with membership. It does not help local democracy if councillors are members of the ESA, because I am not sure about the principle of merit. The Deputy Chairperson also made that point.

I do not understand why Assembly Members cannot be members of the all-powerful board. I could see some merit in it if the ESA were to be merely an administrative vehicle, but it will have powers on spiritual and social matters, among other things. Unless there is cross-party political control at MLA level, it will not work.

The Deputy Chairperson: We have raised that point with you at previous meetings.

Mr Stewart: I will relay members’ concerns to the Minister. Membership of the ESA is a policy decision for the Minister, and her view is that the provisions in the Bill are correct. I understand Mr McCrea’s point, but I can only explain again the purpose behind the Assembly disqualification reference. It is in recognition that, in the Minister’s view, there would be a conflict of interest if MLAs were part of the regional organisation, which would, in turn, be accountable to her and to the Assembly through the Committee. MLAs could end up being accountable to themselves or to one another. The proposals are not unusual; they mirror those for the Library Authority and for most, if not all, similar regional service-delivery authorities.

The Deputy Chairperson: MLAs are also Ministers, but that does not prevent other MLAs from holding them to account. When a Department of justice is established and a Minister for justice appointed, will the Policing Board be dissolved?

Mr Stewart: I cannot comment on that; I have no knowledge of policy in that area.

Mr B McCrea: At some stage, a Department for policing and justice will be set up, and I understand that there will be two Assembly Committees to scrutinise it. We also have a Policing Board. Can we get legal advice on whether there is a potential conflict of interest?

This is the opinion of one Minister. Can the Department find out whether there is a legal impediment to Assembly Members sitting on the regional board of the ESA? Can we seek legal advice on the matter? I would like the Department to come back on that, but I would also like the Committee to seek its own independent legal advice on the issue.

Mr Stewart: There is no legal impediment to Assembly Members sitting on the regional board. The legal impediment would arise from the amendment that would be made to the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975 if the Education Bill goes through. If, for any reason, that provision were removed from the Bill, there would be no legal impediment and it would be possible for MLAs to be members of the ESA. The Committee may wish to seek legal advice on the matter, but that is where we see the legal impediment arising. It is a policy decision on the risk of conflict of interest.

The Deputy Chairperson: Under the current system, MLAs are also members of education and library boards, and there does not seem to be a conflict of interest there. Using that analogy, why should there be a conflict of interest in this case?

Mr Stewart: If we were not proceeding with the review of public administration along current lines, the Minister of the day might have wanted to consider the matter anyway. However, that is a hypothetical situation. I can merely reiterate to the Committee that, in common with the Library Authority and other regional authorities, the administrative policy is in line with some of our ministerial colleagues: to avoid conflict of interest, members of the ESA should not be MLAs.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will take Mr McCrea's point on board and seek legal advice on behalf of the Committee. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: The next member to ask a question is Edwin Poots.

Mr Poots: Four years is the maximum time that someone can hold a position in the ESA. I do not necessarily disagree with that, but there might be a problem if the changeover takes place every four years and the entire board changes. Will the Bill allow for half the members to leave after the four-year term and the other half to stay for a six-year term, in the first instance, and use a rotational system thereafter?

Mr Stewart: That is precisely the sort of practical arrangement that will be required. It is possible for reappointments to be made after the four-year term, although two terms is the normal maximum that the Commissioner for Public Appointments recommends. However, as you rightly said, it would place the organisation at considerable disadvantage if we renewed its entire membership at the same time. We will take all steps necessary to stagger the change, whether that involves extending or shortening appointments.

Mr Poots: It makes sense for members of the ESA not to be Assembly Members, because we will be holding them to account.

Mr Lunn: I am sorry to bang on about membership, but here we go again. Schedule 1 states that most of the board should be district councillors "so far as practicable". Is there room for manoeuvre?

I have said this before, but we started with no democratic representation being proposed for the board. We have not stopped at the halfway point of some democratic representation and have, instead, gone straight to a position where a majority of district councillors will control the board.

It is mooted that the ESA board will be made up of between seven and 12 people. Contrast that with the board of the Library Authority, which has 18 members. With all due respect to the Library Authority, the ESA board will have much more responsibility, and we are constantly being told that its budget and organisation will be huge.

You mentioned merit as the basis for selection, but what about experience, cross-party representation and geographical spread? I cannot see how the board will be put together on a satisfactory basis. Councillors who have the required expertise and experience may have to be moved on four years down the line, and perhaps five more councillors with the requisite experience and expertise will have to be found. It does not sound feasible.

I hesitate to suggest that the board of a public body should be made bigger. However, if the Library Authority needs 18 people, does it make sense that ESA could be run by a board of eight? Indeed, five of those eight people will need another qualification, which has nothing to do with education but is at the whim of the electorate.

Mr Stewart: If you feel that there is too much local democratic accountability now, I am tempted to remind you of the Chinese proverb: "be careful what you ask for — you might get it."

The wording, that qualifications will be secured "so far as practicable", does not give us a choice of whether to do that or not. The phrase is there to allow for the, albeit unlikely, event of insufficient numbers of

councillors coming forward who wish to be members of the ESA or who prove themselves to be qualified. However, it does not give us what you called “room for manoeuvre” to depart from the principle that is in the Bill.

I recognise members’ concerns that there may not be enough ESA board members. Our view is that up to 12 people is sufficient and strikes the right balance between breadth of competence, experience and manageability. Organisations with larger numbers sometimes struggle to be effective in making decisions, so the numbers that the Bill proposes are a sensible balance and compromise.

The additional qualifications, competence or experience that we are looking for are not an absolute requirement. It is extremely desirable that we have members with experience in education or a related field, but it is not absolutely essential. The core principles are that the ESA will be a body with a budget of some £2 billion and with 50,000 staff delivering an indispensable public service. The quality of membership will be the key to its success; that is why the merit principle will feature strongly in the appointment arrangements.

Mr Lunn: What about the inevitable problem of cross-party representation on the board? Cross-party representation is bound to be demanded, but it does not necessarily tie in with expertise and experience.

Mr Stewart: Cross-party representation may be desirable, but it would be difficult, in fact impossible, for us to guarantee it in legislation. Mr Poots will be familiar with that from his time considering the arrangements for the Library Authority.

We could not, for example, employ d’Hondt to achieve political balance. Ironically, that would be regarded as discriminatory and, therefore, could not be included in legislation that might be brought to the Assembly. Such provisions can be included in Westminster legislation but not in Assembly legislation, by virtue of section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which we mentioned last week.

Mr Lunn: You will be pleased to know that the Alliance Party agrees with the DUP about the Assembly disqualification rule, which is absolutely right.

The Deputy Chairperson: What about Trevor’s point that although the Library Authority is a much smaller body, with less onerous responsibilities, it has more board members. The ESA will have huge responsibilities, yet it will have a relatively small board. How do you explain that difference?

Mr Stewart: It is not for me to comment on other Ministers’ decisions or, indeed, on the advice of officials from other Departments. We believe that the proposed number of board members for the education

and skills authority is correct. We note Committee members’ opinions on the matter, and we will relay them to the Minister. However, the short answer is that we think that we have got the number right.

The Deputy Chairperson: The ESA will have quite a few subcommittees, which will mean that a small number of people will be dispersed among them, resulting in a heavy workload for those board members.

Mr Stewart: I agree. However, that number can be supplemented, because members of committees will not necessarily have to be full ESA board members.

The Deputy Chairperson: Nevertheless, presumably each committee will include at least one board member.

Mr Stewart: That would be desirable.

The Deputy Chairperson: Therefore, board members could carry quite a workload, in addition to having to attend board meetings.

Mr Stewart: I recognise that possibility, and it is a fair point.

The Deputy Chairperson: Does that not make a case for having more board members?

Mr Stewart: We will take note of that concern. In due course, if it is deemed that ESA membership is too small and that the ESA is not fit for purpose, the Minister will consider changing it. However, at this stage, we are not convinced that more than 12 members are required.

Mr Poots: How many committees do you envisage being established? Assuming that you have a good idea about corporate finance and so forth, will there be three or four? In addition, how many people will be on the committees, and will the existing appointment principles be applied? Will the committees have a majority of public representatives, and will appointments be based on merit?

Mr Stewart: Appointments will be based on merit. We do not have a firm figure for the number of committee members. You mentioned the usual suspects, and we expect to see them on committees. In the past, we spoke about geographically based committees, which will be associated with local teams. There may also be committees that focus on particular themes or areas of service delivery rather than on geographical areas. At this stage, we do not propose to introduce a requirement for most committee members to be local representatives, so that may be a difference.

Mr Poots: With respect to committee powers, I assume that the board will not be able to overturn a committee’s decision easily and that a committee’s recommendations will normally be approved.

Mr Stewart: That will depend on the terms of delegation of functions to committees. However, as a

general principle, when a function has been delegated to a committee, the body that delegates that function would not normally be expected to overturn a committee's decisions.

Mr O'Dowd: I, too, believe that it would be a mistake to have MLAs as members of the ESA board; it would be bad for democracy and bad for education. As the Deputy Chairperson said, the ESA board will be busy and may require more members. How could MLAs sit on the ESA board? They are already fully stretched. The public might say that we are not stretched enough, but we are; therefore it would be a mistake for us to be members of the board of the ESA.

I am not sure where Basil was coming from. I am a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee that considers dual mandates and other matters. The Ulster Unionist Party members on that Committee are among the majority who do not believe in dual mandates. They also agree on whether members of the Policing Board should sit on a justice Committee, because there is already a sense of MLAs holding other MLAs to account.

The legal advice was that there may be a conflict of interest, but "may" is a very big word in law. I do not understand where Basil is coming from when he talks about the democratic make-up of the board. One of the general principles of the RPA is to democratise the administration of public services, because many complaints have been made about too many quangos. Perhaps Trevor will forgive me for my next comment: if one was a member of the great and the good or a member of the Alliance Party, one was set for life.

Mr Lunn: Rubbish.

Mr O'Dowd: Why not ensure that appointments are made to the board through a democratic process? I am not sure what Basil's reasonable compromises are. He attempts to portray himself as "Mr Reasonable" to the world and its media; however, when he presents me with a reasonable amendment, I will consider it reasonably, and the rest of the Committee has a duty to do the same. However, he has presented no such amendments to date. Basil's opening comments merely confirm that his opposition to the ESA Bill is not educational but political. It is disappointing that he did not set aside his perfectly legitimate political ambitions and concerns for a time and study the RPA from a broader educational perspective.

My question is —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Chairperson. Will I get a chance to respond to that conversation at some stage?

The Deputy Chairperson: I ask members to direct their questions to the officials; we are not here for a cross-party discussion.

Mr O'Dowd: I was outlining the status of the debate and responding to comments that have been made.

My question to the officials is about their explanatory notes on clause 2 in which youth services are separated from the rest of the services. Is nursery-school provision included in a different definition, and how will the voice of nursery schools be heard in the overall ESA equation?

Mr Stewart: Technically, nursery schools come under primary education.

Mr O'Dowd: Is that how their voice can be heard through the ESA mechanisms?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: Has giving further weight to the nursery element of the discussion been considered?

Mr Stewart: I am not sure what you mean.

Mr O'Dowd: Some nursery school providers, particularly educationalists, sense that their voice is not being heard. They feel lost in the primary school equation and fear that they will be completely lost in the ESA. Is there any way to reassure them, or are satisfactory provisions in place to ensure that the voice of nursery schools is heard? If so, are those provisions adequately resourced?

Mr Stewart: That is possibly a matter of opinion or policy. We stressed the need for board members, wherever possible, to have relevant experience and knowledge. I relayed to the Minister the view that we must ensure that nursery schools are not overlooked. The same point is frequently made to us by other stakeholders, particularly from youth services and early years, which overlaps with nursery provision.

Your general point is correct, and we acknowledge that concern. We are not merely a Department for schools; education is about more than schooling, although that is an extremely important element. That is why clause 2 covers every dimension of development and all three major spheres of education. It is a valid point that the membership of the ESA should reflect that and should not comprise solely schools' representatives or representatives from any one part of the school sector.

The Deputy Chairperson: John, when you made your point about nursery education, were you referring to statutory provision or were you including private, and community and voluntary provision too?

Mr O'Dowd: As reflects the different voices that I have heard, I was referring to all nursery schools.

The Deputy Chairperson: Does the Department have the power to include in the Bill clauses that refer to the private, and community and voluntary sectors, or is its power confined to statutory provision?

Mr Stewart: It covers both. The broad term for early years in the Bill is “educational services”, and that covers statutory and non-statutory providers.

Mr McCausland: Comparison was made between the education and skills authority and the Northern Ireland Library Authority (NILA) in relation to membership and councillors. Do you not agree that that is not comparing like with like? There is a single library service; we do not have voluntary, controlled, maintained and Irish-medium libraries. The complexity and sensitivities of education suggest that it is not a case of comparing like with like.

Therefore perhaps we need to give more consideration to the composition and size of the board, although I have no set views about how that may be done. Do you at least accept that it is not necessarily a case of comparing like with like?

Mr Stewart: I do; and we do not want to give that impression. Several members have concerns about the proposed number of members of the ESA board; I recognise that, and will relay those concerns to the Minister. The legislation includes a provision that allows us to vary the number of members of the ESA quickly by Order. Therefore, if it transpires that the number is not right and there is a need for a larger membership, that could be addressed fairly quickly.

Mr McCausland: Have you given any thought to the possible number of committees and subcommittees? If you have compared the new body with other public bodies, you must have some idea of its human resources and finance needs. Have you given any thought to what the time commitment may be for people who are members of the ESA board?

Mr Stewart: Rather than giving you a figure about the number of committees off the top of my head, which may be unhelpful, I am conscious that we owe the Committee a paper that we offered some weeks ago, setting out in more detail what we propose for the local structure of the ESA; particularly the role and composition of committees.

If it would be helpful, our thinking to date on the number of committees could be included in that paper. I am not certain how much information we could offer at this stage on what the time commitment may be, but I will take that query back to the Department and give it some thought.

Mr McCausland: Briefly, under the current regime, 40% of an education and library board’s members are drawn from local authorities. I do not know about any other education and library boards, but in the Belfast Education and Library Board, and I declare an interest in that regard, it was done by proportionality.

You said that it would require Westminster legislation to have proportionality in councillor representation

to make sure that it is reflective. If it were left to the Department or to the Minister, some people could be sceptical about the reflectiveness and appropriateness of how the process operated.

Mr Stewart: I am not sure whether that was a comment or a question.

Mr McCausland: The first part was a question; the second part was a comment.

Mr Stewart: I am grateful for the clarification. It would require an amendment to Westminster legislation. When colleagues in DCAL examined the composition of the Library Authority and how they could bring about cross-party representation in its membership, they thought that they had the obvious answer: apply a d’Hondt-type mechanism. They merrily proceeded on that basis.

For the sake of completeness, they checked with legal advisers whether that was sound. They were surprised — as we were — to learn that not only was it not sound, but that it would be unlawful. They could not proceed on that basis.

There is no easy or straightforward way for us to include a mechanism in the legislation that would guarantee such an outcome. There are always tensions in any mechanism that attempts to ensure a balance between elements such as political opinion, gender or geography and the merit principle. Those factors are not completely incompatible and the tensions are not insuperable, but we would encounter considerable difficulty in trying to guarantee a particular political representation or outcome in the Bill.

Mr McCausland: I am glad that it is not impossible to reconcile those two factors of having some form of proportionality and ensuring that board members have certain competences and skills, because sometimes people would simply throw their hands up in horror and say that that cannot be done. It may be complex, but it is possible. Does all this architecture not become incredibly complex because of the nature of education and the sensitivity and complexities around it? We should not necessarily dismiss concerns about it.

Mr Stewart: That is exactly right, and we do not seek to dismiss them. The merit principle will need to feature centrally in the appointment arrangements. We will want to seek advice from the Commissioner for Public Appointments on the best practice for striking a balance between, or reflecting appropriately, the merit principle and ensuring that there is an appropriate spread of representation and composition in the body so that it enjoys widespread trust and confidence.

Miss McIlveen: Clause 2(5) and 2(6) provide for the ESA to carry out administrative functions under the direction of the Department of Education or the Department for Employment and Learning. Do you

know what the extent of that may be? What direction will come from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and will it provide funding to pay for the functions that are carried out? Does that mean that there may also be a representative from DEL on the ESA board?

Mr Stewart: On the latter point, no; there have been no proposals for a DEL representative. If DEL wished to have functions carried out, there would be an associated payment. At present, neither Department has anything specific in mind. It became apparent to us as the Bill was being developed that the scope for which such clauses such can be used is quite narrow.

Earlier, Basil asked what is meant by administrative functions. I have to say candidly that it means less than we thought it meant at the beginning of the process. We had several functions in mind to be covered by those clauses; one of them was the payment of teachers' salaries and pensions, which is currently with the Department. We thought that we might be able to use that provision to move that function from the Department to the ESA. The advice that we received from lawyers was that we could not do so.

Where a function is specifically reflected in statute, all-purpose clauses such as clause 2(5) and 2(6) cannot be used to move that function from one statutory authority to another. That clause refers to low-level administrative functions and, therefore, is likely to be of much less use to us than we thought it might at the beginning of the process.

Miss McIlveen: One of the purposes of the ESA was to reduce bureaucracy and make efficiency savings. Will you be mindful of the cost of setting up committees and subcommittees? Their members will have to be paid and there will be general expenses associated with them.

Mr Stewart: We will be mindful of that, but we will have to strike a balance between doing that and ensuring that the organisation is fit for purpose, bearing in mind members' concerns about the number of members on the ESA, the number of committees, the potential workload, its importance and complexity. We do not want to spend money on the administration of the ESA that would be better spent in classrooms or on early-years provision or youth groups.

However, the organisation must be fit for purpose; it must account to the Department and to the Committee for the £2 billion of taxpayers' money that it will spend each year and for the education service's standards of achievement. Its committee structure must be equipped to do that.

Miss McIlveen: I am genuinely concerned that we may end up with even more bureaucracy because each time officials come to the Committee, there seem to be

more and more people getting involved in the operation of the ESA.

Paragraph 11 of your submission says that the Department is considering an amendment to clause 2, which concerns youth services. Would that amendment deal with transferring those services to local councils?

Mr Stewart: There are no proposals to transfer those services to district councils.

Mr Lunn: John mentioned the disqualification of Assembly members from the ESA board. He said that if MLAs are as busy as they ought to be, there is no way that they would have time to apply themselves to something as rigorous as the ESA board, never mind a conflict of interest arising. Let us hope that, come June 2011, district councillors will have much more responsibility. Although, with the way things are going — the Minister is holding on to her fiefdoms — district councillors may not be as busy as might have been expected. However, they will be fewer in number and busier. Could that cause a problem? Even a busy district councillor could face a conflict of interest, given his duties as a member of the ESA and pressure from his constituents.

Mr Stewart: There is always potential for a conflict of interest when anyone holds more than one public office. The ESA would need to ensure, through its standing orders or instruments of governance, that there are proper arrangements for addressing potential conflicts of interest. There is a significant difference between that and the systematic conflict of interest that could arise if MLAs were members of the ESA. That is where we draw the distinction. Councillors will have a considerable workload; being a councillor and a member of the ESA would be a significant challenge. There is no point in denying that.

Mr McCausland: If an MLA is a member of an education and library board, we can see how stretched they are, even if they are a member of a board whose every meeting they can attend because it is comparatively near Belfast. How could an MLA discharge their duties as a member of such a big body with such huge responsibilities as well as do their work as an MLA? It is not feasible.

Mr B McCrea: As a busy MLA, I sit on the Education Committee and the Policing Board. If I were given the opportunity to become a member of the ESA, I presume that I would not sit on the Policing Board. That is how you find the time.

I will say one thing in response to Mr O'Dowd: we oppose these provisions because they are not about education; they are about politics. That is our position. We have made our position on the way forward in education clear in the Assembly; if he wishes to talk to me about it, he may.

Mrs M Bradley: For several years, I was a member of an education and library board. After being at the Assembly for a year or so, I realised that I could not do justice to the education and library board. For that reason, I felt that I had to resign.

The Deputy Chairperson: Schedule 1(14) deals with finance. The Committee compared the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and the Education Bill. Schedule 1(15)(3) of the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 states:

“the Authority shall pay to the Department all sums received by it in the course of, or in connection with, carrying out of its functions.”

The Department in question is the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Why is a similar provision not in the Education Bill?

Mr Stewart: Those are commonly known as “appropriations and aid”, by which a Department or public authority receives a significant income stream. That schedule of the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 reflects the standard arrangement for returning that money to the centre. We did not see a need for that in the Education Bill, simply because the ESA will not receive significant sums of money.

Mr Lunn: Can the Library Authority borrow money?

Mr Stewart: I am not sure, but we have specifically excluded that from the ESA.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment brings in money.

Mr Stewart: It does. Its arrangements will carry forward into the ESA. However, we did not see a need for an arrangement similar to that in the Libraries Act.

The Deputy Chairperson: Why not?

Mr Stewart: I am not sure what DCAL’s thinking was on the Library Authority. However, a similar need simply has not arisen in the Department of Education.

The Deputy Chairperson: Perhaps you should look into the matter.

Mr Stewart: I will. However, I am afraid that I cannot comment on DCAL’s thinking on the matter. I will look at it again with regard to the ESA.

The Deputy Chairperson: Page 186 of the same document relates to schedule 1(7)(5) to the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act 2009, which states:

“Every member of a committee who, at the time of appointment, was a member of the Regional Board shall, on ceasing to be a member of the Regional Board, also cease to be a member of the committee.”

Is that not the case with ESA?

Mr Stewart: I am not entirely familiar with that provision of health legislation. In the Education Bill

we have not insisted that every member of a committee must also be a full member of the ESA. That being the case, it would not be logical to have an equivalent provision to require someone to stand down from a committee if that person also stood down from ESA.

Mr O’Dowd: Sub-paragraph (3) states:

“A person who is not a member of the Regional Board shall not, except with the approval of the Department, be appointed to a committee.”

Does that not give the Health Department leeway to alleviate any discrepancy?

The Deputy Chairperson: That allows a person to be appointed.

Mr O’Dowd: Aye. However, if I have picked up your point correctly, my understanding is that if someone leaves the board, he or she must also automatically leave the committee and — I know that we are talking about the Health Department — the Department cannot, in those circumstances, reappoint someone to the committee.

Mr Lunn: I think that it says the same thing in schedule 1(7)(2) to the Education Bill, which is also on page 186.

Mr Stewart: There is a similar requirement for departmental approval of committee members when they are not members of the ESA. That is correct.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. We will move to the next presentation, which is on the transfer of staff. The matter is dealt with in clause 9 and schedule 2 to the Bill. The lion’s share of the work has fallen on your shoulders, Mr Stewart.

Mr Stewart: It always does. It is well deserved.

The Deputy Chairperson: Your colleagues have an easy time.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Deputy Chairperson. As you say, clause 9 and schedule 2 deal with the transfer of staff from the employment of boards of governors to the employment of the ESA by means of staff-transfer schemes. That transfer is intended to take place on 1 January 2010, subject, of course, to the will of the Assembly. However, as we have discussed over the past couple of weeks, it would need to be commenced earlier than that; indeed, at Royal Assent. That is to allow the Department to draw up the necessary transfer schemes in time for them to be implemented on 1 January 2010.

Schedule 2 sets out the detailed provisions that will govern the transfer. Those are consistent with similar provisions in other review of public administration legislation and with the guiding principles that have been issued by the Public Service Commission. I want to draw three points to the Committee’s attention.

First, at paragraph 2(4), there is reference to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006, which are more commonly referred to as TUPE. The effect of the provision is that TUPE regulations will apply, which means that staff will transfer on their existing salaries and terms and conditions of employment.

Schedule 2(6) and 2(8) extend that a little further and deal with pensions; they provide that staff will be afforded pension protection. Staff rights to acquire pension benefits, when taken as a whole, will be the same as, or no less favourable than, those that they enjoyed before their transfer.

Paragraph 3 of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 deals with continuity of action. That provision ensures that actions that former employers have taken in respect of employment will remain valid and that actions that former employers take at the time of transfer can be carried on by the education and skills authority as if it had initiated those actions in the first place.

The Deputy Chairperson: You said that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 will apply. Will that not mean that the education and skills authority will have to deal with a plethora of staff who had different terms and conditions of service with their previous employers? Could that not raise equality and job evaluation issues and cause the education and skills authority a huge headache?

Mr Stewart: It certainly means that there will be groups of staff in the organisation, at least initially, who have significantly different terms and conditions. The regulations will provide some scope for equal opportunities and equal pay claims; there is no doubt of that. The education and skills authority will have to manage that significant challenge. However, I have no doubt that the aim of the organisation will be to harmonise and equalise terms and conditions for all staff over time.

However, that needs to be done in the normal way, through negotiation and engagement with staff and trades union representatives. Bearing in mind the provisions in contracts of employment, the education and skills authority cannot simply ride roughshod over terms and conditions. That harmonisation will have to be negotiated and worked through over time.

The Deputy Chairperson: Has the chief executive designate begun any negotiations with trades unions, teachers or others, in the interim before the Bill is enacted?

Mr Stewart: The chief executive designate has yet to hold any specific negotiations. At present, Gavin Boyd and his team are working on the draft transfer schemes and are engaging closely with trades union

colleagues on that. I do not think that Mr Boyd needs to look at particular terms and conditions just yet to examine how they might evolve over time. Mr Boyd and his colleagues are also talking to existing employers about the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006, as they place certain responsibilities on existing employers to engage with staff to ensure that they are properly informed and consulted about the transfer.

The Deputy Chairperson: In the interim between the education and skills authority's being set up and the harmonisation of a plethora of various conditions of service, is there not the danger of gridlock if individuals decide to pursue cases?

Mr Stewart: It is difficult to comment on possible gridlock without going over all the facts and figures on the degree of variation. However, we are aware of the possibility. I assure you that the education and skills authority implementation team (ESAIT) is aware of it and takes it very seriously. At present, I do not think that it is possible to predict exactly what will happen.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is there a plan to bring about harmonisation?

Mr Stewart: No; not at present.

Mr Lunn: Is there anything in the regulations about the transfer of staff that is unique to this situation or are they fairly standard?

Mr Stewart: To the best of knowledge, the regulations are standard and consistent across the RPA.

Mr Lunn: That is how it looks. It is complicated, but well rehearsed.

Mr Stewart: There are the usual complications.

The Deputy Chairperson: Given the headache that could arise from the harmonisation of terms and conditions of service, would it not be sensible for the education and skills authority and the chief executive designate to attempt to scope any potential problems and to formulate a plan of harmonisation now rather than wait until the authority has been set up?

Mr Stewart: That is a sensible suggestion. I expect a degree of consistency on the extent of that variation among the five education and library boards. I am hopeful that there will not be a major difference among the boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). There is, perhaps, greater scope for variation in schools, particularly those that are currently employers. There is consistency in employers' terms and conditions, but not always in the application of those terms and conditions. Nevertheless, your suggestion is valid, and we recognise the risk. Like all risks, it should be managed and scoped early.

The Deputy Chairperson: There is, presumably, some equivalence between the maintained and controlled

sectors at the moment; however, the difficulties arise with voluntary grammar schools. Such problems have already arisen with classroom assistants, whose terms and conditions are still under consideration and whose jobs are still being evaluated even though that process is almost complete for board staff.

Mr O'Dowd: The job evaluation process has been under way for many years and has brought many workforces' terms and conditions into line. The advantage of a single employing body is that any future job evaluation will encapsulate all staff. Is that the type of process that Gavin Boyd, or whoever, must adhere to in future?

Mr Stewart: He will have to do so where there is a need for job evaluation. The process to which Mr O'Dowd refers has been under way for many years, and the Public Accounts Committee has sharply criticised the Department's stewardship of the matter. A clear message and key recommendation that arose was that the Department did not ensure sufficient consistency and commonality of process and practice across the education and library boards and the various organisations. We have learnt that lesson, and, as Mr O'Dowd rightly says, it is a key plank of the rationale for establishing a single employing authority for education. In future, it will protect the interests of staff and of the taxpayer, and the recent job evaluation difficulties should not arise again.

The Deputy Chairperson: After the classroom assistants' dispute, the Minister announced that she will initiate an education workforce review, as the matter is related to terms and conditions of service. Has there been any correlation between the Department's review and the ESA's work to ensure harmonisation of terms and conditions?

Mr Stewart: I cannot comment on that matter, because I am not closely involved in the workforce review. If it is helpful, I will investigate the matter when I return to the Department.

The Deputy Chairperson: It would be useful to ensure that there is dialogue on that front. We will move to the presentation on clause 22 and schedules 3, 4 and 5, which relate to the transfer of assets.

Mr Stewart: Clause 22 outlines the scope of the three schedules. Schedule 3 deals with the transfer of the assets, liabilities and staff of the various dissolved bodies to the ESA on the appointed day; schedule 4 addresses the transfer of certain assets and liabilities from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools before the appointed day; and schedule 5 outlines arrangements for the transfer of certain staff from the Department to the ESA on the appointed day.

We intend that the provisions will commence on Royal Assent so that the Department can draw up the necessary transfer schemes before the appointed

day. However, with the exception of schedule 4, the schemes will not come into operation and the transfers will not take place until the appointed day. The slightly different approach in schedule 4 stems from the fact that some CCMS assets ought to be transferred to the Church rather than to the ESA, because they were funded by the Church in the past.

The schedule would allow for those assets, and any associated liabilities, to be identified and transferred to the Church before the appointed day. Thereafter, all other assets and liabilities of the CCMS would transfer to the ESA on the appointed day by means of a scheme under schedule 3 rather than schedule 4.

Schedule 3 is similar in construction and effect to schedule 2, but there are a couple of points to emphasise. Paragraphs 1 and 2 contain exclusions for assets and liabilities that relate to libraries' matters, which would transfer to the Library Authority rather than to the ESA. Likewise, where the continuity of action provisions relate to libraries' matters, they point to the Library Authority rather than to the ESA.

Schedule 4 is similar, but, again, the continuity of action provisions relate to the Church rather than to ESA. Schedule 5 is similar in construction and effect.

The Committee will be aware of the Executive's decision that Civil Service staff who transfer to the ESA and other RPA organisations will be offered a choice between permanent transfer and secondment. That does not require a change in legislation. Permanent transfers will be dealt with under the provisions in schedule 5, while secondments will be dealt with by provisions in schedule 1(5)(6) and 1(5)(7).

The Deputy Chairperson: Will school buildings be included among the assets that are returned to the Church? Would all assets be covered by legal agreements that could be easily identified?

Mr Stewart: The assets are office premises rather than schools; schools are already in the ownership of the Church and will remain there. They are office premises that are formally in the ownership of the CCMS but which have been gifted to the CCMS by the Church or funded by the Church in the past.

Where the Department has invested in improvements to premises that were funded or gifted by the Church, arrangements may have to be put in place so that the Department can clawback its share of the money. It is in recognition that although the CCMS is a public authority not all its assets are publicly funded. Natural justice suggests that they should be returned to the Church, whence they came. All publicly funded assets will transfer to the ESA on the appointed day.

The Deputy Chairperson: What arrangement will the Department have to clawback its investment in premises?

Mr Stewart: It will depend on the agreement that was put in place, but, essentially, we will get back what we put in.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is that in the existing agreements?

Mr Stewart: Where there are existing agreements in place, yes. I would need to study the detail.

The Deputy Chairperson: What happens where there are no existing agreements?

Mr Stewart: There may or may not be existing agreements, but there will be in every case clear detail of the ownership and level of investment that the Department has made in an asset; we will ensure that we get out what we put in. The legislation is drafted to allow for that. It is for the Department to make the necessary transfer schemes in either case. The Department will need to be satisfied of the need to transfer an asset to the Church. The default is that anything that is not transferred to the Church transfers to the ESA.

The Deputy Chairperson: You say that there will be records of investment made by the Department in those premises, and to use your words:

“We will get back what we put in.”

Is there a formula for that?

Mr Stewart: I would need to check on the detail and come back to the Committee.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the process be governed under the Department of Finance and Personnel guidelines and procedures? There is already a set statutory process to which all Departments must adhere.

Mr Stewart: It will; and DFP will look very closely at what we do to ensure that we adhere to that guidance.

The Deputy Chairperson: Would there not be a massive legal task in the conveyancing of properties back to the Catholic Church or of assets back to the Department? Will that not create the kind of huge administrative burden that the ESA is being set up to avoid?

Mr Stewart: There will be a significant administrative task in transferring all the assets, including those of the education and library boards. Those assets must be identified, listed and catalogued, and all the necessary legal documentation transferred and amended in order to make the change.

The transfer back to the Church of a relatively small number of properties will not be a major element of that huge challenge. The Deputy Chairperson is right that the task is big, but it is unavoidable. The asset base in the controlled sector alone is worth some £2.3 billion. The Department must ensure that the transfer is legally sound and watertight.

The Deputy Chairperson: Finally, do the transfer-scheme provisions in schedule 5 take into account procedures that are required to address the rights of Civil Service staff?

Mr Stewart: I am not sure that I understand the question.

The Deputy Chairperson: Presumably some of the staff moved from the Department will be Northern Ireland Civil Service members. Will their rights be protected in schedule 5?

Mr Stewart: Yes; there will be consistency. Anyone transferring to the ESA permanently will no longer be a civil servant; they will lose their Civil Service status. Nevertheless, the protection will be similar to that afforded to staff transferring from other organisations. TUPE — and the level of pension protection — will apply.

The Deputy Chairperson: In the absence of any other questions, I thank the witnesses and have no doubt that we will meet again before very long.

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 20 February 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

EU Legislation and Regulation: Implementation

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister who is responsible in its Department for European affairs; and who is accountable for the implementation of EU legislation and regulation. (AQW 3849/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): OFMDFM Ministers take lead responsibility for co-ordinating engagement in Europe on behalf of the Executive. Within OFMDFM, Ministers are responsible for Departmental European policy and senior officials are accountable to Ministers for the implementation of EU relevant legislation and regulation.

Programme for Government Targets

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what risk assessment it has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4826/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Delivery Agreement for each of OFMDFM's Programme for Government (PfG) Public Service Agreements (PSAs) set out the Department's strategy for the management of the risk. As PSAs are cross-cutting in nature, this will include the management of any identified risks to the achievement of targets that fall to other Ministers and their departments to deliver. As we approach the end of Year 1 of the 2008-11 PfG, we have commissioned a review of the PSA Delivery Agreements, and the risk management strategy set out in each PSA.

All of OFMDFM's PfG commitments and targets will be reflected in the Department's business plan. Within the business plan, each target will be subjected to a further risk assessment.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many meetings it has held with each of the three MEPs since devolution. (AQW 4857/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A list of meetings between OFMDFM and MEPs is set out in the tables below.

Minister	MEP	Date	Purpose / context
Ian Paisley, Martin McGuinness	Jim Nicholson	19 July 2007	Briefing on Taskforce
Ian Paisley, Martin McGuinness	Bairbre de Brún	19 July 2007	Briefing on Taskforce
Ian Paisley, Martin McGuinness	Jim Nicholson, Bairbre de Brún	10 September 2007	Breakfast meeting with European Parliament Regional Development Committee

Minister	MEP	Date	Purpose / context
Peter Robinson, Martin McGuinness	Jim Nicholson	10 November 2008	Potential for greater engagement between the Executive and the EU
Peter Robinson, Martin McGuinness	Jim Nicholson, Bairbre de Brun	10 February 2009	Update following meeting with Commissioner Fischer Boel; general briefing on Taskforce

OFMDFM OFFICIALS' MEETINGS WITH MEPS

MEP	Date	Purpose / context
Jim Allister	8 May 2007	Meeting with InvestNI team in Brussels
Jim Nicholson	13 June 2007	Visit of Sir Reg Empey, MLA
Jim Nicholson	29 June 2007	Meeting with NSMC Secretariat
Jim Nicholson Bairbre de Brún	10 September 2007	Briefing by NSMC Secretariat to European Parliament Regional Development Committee
Jim Allister	22 November 2007	Barroso Taskforce – NICS visit to Brussels
Jim Nicholson	22 November 2007	Barroso Taskforce – NICS visit to Brussels
Bairbre de Brún	22 November 2007	Barroso Taskforce – NICS visit to Brussels
Jim Nicholson	19 March 2008	To discuss ONIEB premises in Brussels
Jim Allister	11 June 2008	Introduce new team member
Jim Nicholson	11 June 2008	Introduce new team member
Jim Nicholson	20 January 2009	Views on EU matters
Jim Allister	20 January 2009	Views on EU issues

In addition to these meetings, OFMDFM officials working in the Executive's Office in Brussels are in regular, less formal contact with the MEPs, for example when they address groups of visitors or support functions that are hosted in the Executive's office in Brussels.

Omagh: Barracks in

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to ensure that the history of the site associated with the barracks in Omagh is retained. (AQW 4939/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The former military sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia in Omagh are owned by the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

We are pressing the Prime Minister to have these, and other sites, gifted and, if they become the property of the Executive, issues relating to the preservation of the history of the sites should be considered by the relevant redevelopment department.

The Member will wish to note that some of the buildings at St Lucia do already have listed status.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Child Care Strategy will be published for consultation; and which Department has the responsibility for taking it forward. (AQW 5130/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A Sub-Group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People is currently considering the issue of childcare provision here.

It is hoped that this Sub-Group will provide a preliminary report to the Ministerial Sub-Committee later this month; the report will map existing provision and explore the wider economic case for childcare. Decisions will be taken at that stage as to departmental responsibility and any outworking of the proposals therein.

Pork Dioxin

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the outcome of the meeting with EU Commissioner Fischer Boel on Tuesday 10th February 2009, about the pork dioxin incident.

(AQW 5141/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Michelle Gildernew, met with Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel to brief her on the handling of the dioxin situation and the serious consequences that the discovery of contaminated feed has had on the beef and pork sectors at both production and processing levels.

The Commissioner was supportive of actions that would restore confidence in our beef and pigmeat markets both in Europe and the rest of the world. It was agreed that an urgent formal request for a co-financed (i.e. national and EU funding) Exceptional Support Measure would be submitted and also a request for state aid approval to enable the payment of any national funds. These would be broadly in line with the Exceptional Support Measure and State Aid approval agreed for the ROI and would be taken forward by DETI and DARD working with DEFRA.

Both the First Minister and the DETI Minister raised the issue of the low level of dairy export refunds, the opening of intervention to different types of cheese and the possibility of increasing the tonnage into intervention. The Commissioner urged us to encourage the NI Dairy Industry to diversify as the industry's dependence on whole milk powder made it very vulnerable to fluctuations in world market prices. She indicated that the Commission was monitoring the world market closely and export refund levels would be set accordingly. We noted that the Commissioner was open to increasing the tonnage into intervention but that this would be subject to a tendering process.

Minister Gildernew underlined the need for flexibility in the Rural Development Programme in the current economic climate and that official-level engagement would follow. Minister Gildernew also discussed the closure of the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Match Funding

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will treat in-kind contributions by community and voluntary groups as eligible for match funding through the Rural Development Programme and rural anti-poverty programmes.

(AQW 4098/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): My Department is currently developing programmes of activity to address rural poverty, social exclusion and community development, and therefore I cannot confirm that in-kind contributions by Community and Voluntary Groups will be treated as regards eligibility for match funding. The appropriateness of treating in-kind contributions as potential match funding will be considered within the economic appraisal process of each proposed programme. However under all but the farm diversification measure of Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007 – 13, social economy enterprises may provide match funding towards eligible costs in the form of contributions-in-kind in line with the programme operating rules.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the use of interferon gamma testing to combat Bovine Tuberculosis.

(AQW 4746/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The skin test is the standard EU test for the screening cattle herds for TB. European legislation stipulates that Member States must use the skin test for routine herd testing.

At present, we are already using the Gamma interferon test in specific circumstances. However it is only approved under the current relevant EU Directive for use as a supplementary test for TB, and so it has to be used in conjunction with the skin test. It is recognised by the EU as a useful additional test to, but not a replacement for, the skin test.

Our assessment is that the gamma interferon test has a place in the TB programme in the north for detecting disease. It identifies additional infected animals that are negative to the skin test. We will continue to develop the use of this tool.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures have been taken to introduce pre-movement tests in relation to the eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis. (AQW 4747/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The EU rules require pre-movement testing for animals exported to other Member States. In the north of Ireland, we comply fully with this requirement and in addition, pre-movement testing is required for animals exported to Britain.

In the north of Ireland, TB testing is carried out annually in accordance with EU Directive 64/432 which requires that for a herd to retain officially tuberculosis free status all animals on the holding must be tested on an annual basis.

We identified a gap in the testing in relation to single animals that miss an annual herd test and in order to plug this gap, we have introduced a requirement for a pre-movement test for the specific category of single animals that have missed their annual herd test. From summer 2008, the movement of single animals that have missed their annual test is restricted after 15 months, until they are tested.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the impact that the movement of badger populations from outside any future cull areas would have on the prevalence of tuberculosis in cattle population. (AQW 4748/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The evidence from Britain and the South is contradictory in relation to the potential impact of the movement of badger populations from outside any cull areas on the prevalence of tuberculosis in the cattle population. In Britain, it was thought that this was an important factor, while in the South it was thought that there was no apparent effect.

We recognise that the movement of badger populations from outside any cull areas may have an impact on the prevalence of tuberculosis in the cattle population, but this is currently an unknown situation in the North.

Our priority in the first phase of the new TB strategy will be to build the evidence we need to make informed policy decisions about wildlife intervention. The proposed badger prevalence study is one of the actions that I believe are necessary to inform decisions, as is the development of plans for a badger removal trial. These studies will provide baseline information on disease and the costs of badger intervention. They may also give us information about whether the movement of badger populations from the study areas has an impact on the prevalence of TB in the cattle population.

Subject to the agreement of the DOE Minister where necessary, and subject to bids for the significant additional funding that will be needed, DARD will undertake the studies and trials that are necessary to guide what we do to reduce the transmission of TB between wildlife and cattle.

Interferon Gamma Tests

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what scientific evidence exists to suggest that the interferon gamma test is an effective way to eliminate bovine tuberculosis. (AQW 4749/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has no scientific evidence to suggest that the interferon gamma test alone is an effective way to eliminate bovine tuberculosis.

The interferon gamma test is approved under the current relevant EU Directive for use only as a supplementary test for TB. It can only be used in conjunction with the skin test.

Our assessment is that the gamma interferon test has a place in the TB programme in the north for dealing with the disease. It identifies additional infected animals that are negative to the skin test. We will continue to develop the use of this tool.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what guarantees can be given that all badgers carrying tuberculosis would be eliminated by a cull. (AQW 4750/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are still key gaps in our scientific knowledge that need to be filled to inform what we do to deal effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers, and to enable us to deal with TB comprehensively and conclusively.

We have identified studies that will provide baseline information on disease and the costs of badger intervention, and inform where any cull or other intervention may be most effectively targeted.

This is work in progress. There are currently no plans for my Department to undertake a cull of badgers.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what scientific evidence exists to suggest that badger cull is the most effective way to eliminate Bovine Tuberculosis. (AQW 4830/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: TB is a multi-factorial disease. The new strategic approach that I outlined in December 2008 to move towards the eradication of TB will require a holistic approach that addresses 3 key strands together - real partnership between government and industry, controlling the spread of TB between cattle, and addressing the wildlife factor. All three are priority areas for action.

On the wildlife aspect, whilst it is established that there is a link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, we do not know with any degree of certainty the extent to which badgers contribute to the incidence of TB in cattle here. Neither do we know what impact badger removal would have on the overall incidence of disease in cattle across the north.

The scientific evidence from Britain and the South around the impact of the removal of badgers on TB in cattle is complex, and at times conflicting. Having assessed all the available information from work in Britain and in the South, the conclusion of our veterinary assessment is that it is not possible to extrapolate the information we need from the work that has been done in Britain and in the South. There is insufficient evidence available to conclude that intervention in badger populations would definitely achieve an effective reduction in TB incidence in cattle in the north.

The position is that there are still key gaps in our scientific knowledge that need to be filled to inform what we do to deal effectively with the reservoir of infection in badgers. One of the priority areas for action in the first phase of the TB Strategy will be to pursue the necessary information gathering actions and research to fill the knowledge gaps and build the evidence we need to make informed policy decisions about wildlife intervention in the north.

Subject to the agreement of the DOE Minister where necessary, and subject to bids for the significant additional funding that will be needed, DARD will undertake the studies and trials that are necessary to guide what we do to reduce the transmission of TB between wildlife and cattle.

Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the amount of compensation paid out for tuberculosis, in each of the past 10 years. (AQW 4832/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The amount of compensation paid out for Tuberculosis in each of the past 10 years is detailed in the following table:

Year	Compensation
1998/99	4,895,826
1999/00	5,776,774
2000/01	7,921,489
2001/02	8,587,921
2002/03	16,255,611
2003/04	15,408,521
2004/05	12,586,405
2005/06	9,225,891
2006/07	7,887,123
2007/08	8,547,534

Research Projects

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how much money ; and (ii) what percentage of the Department's total budget was committed to research projects, in each of the last ten years.
(AQW 4835/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The table below shows the total amount of money committed to research projects for the above period and relates to the core Department, its Agencies and NDPBs.

Financial Year	Total amount of money committed to research projects	% of the Department's total Budget committed to research projects
1999 – 2000	£6,001,000	Not available ¹
2000 – 2001	£6,111,135	Not available ¹
2001 – 2002	£6,193,728	3.34%
2002 – 2003	£6,289,565	3.39%
2003 – 2004	£6,464,783	2.98%
2004 – 2005	£6,603,525	2.67%
2005 – 2006	£6,876,590	3.19%
2006 – 2007	£7,187,998	3.57%
2007 – 2008	Not yet available ²	
2008 – 2009	Not yet available ³	

1 The Department is not required to retain financial records beyond a 7-year limit and budget details for 1999-2001 are therefore not available.

2 Figures are not available at this time.

3 The Departments accounts for 2008/09 have yet to be finalised.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge.
(AQW 4843/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is fully committed to paying businesses for goods and services within the 10-day target and monitors and reports upon performance against that target to management on a monthly basis. For the month of December, which is the first month for which statistics are available, 80% of the invoices for my Department and its agencies were paid within the 10 day target.

DARD will be monitoring the 10 day prompt payment target and inform business areas of their performance.

MEPs: Meeting with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many meetings she has held with each of the three MEPs since devolution. (AQW 4858/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since devolution, I have had 5 meetings with Mr Jim Nicholson MEP and 2 meetings with Ms Bairbre De Brun MEP

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail all the research sponsored by her Department on Bovine Tuberculosis that has not been published and to state the reasons for not publishing the research. (AQW 4879/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In the last 10 years, 7 research projects dealing with Bovine Tuberculosis, funded in full by this Department, and 14 externally-funded research projects, supported in part by this Department, have been completed. Research findings have been published from all of these projects. At least 3 further research papers are in preparation for publication.

Community-Based Lifelong Learning Schemes

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding is available to community based lifelong learning schemes to retrain rural dwellers seeking employment. (AQW 5262/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is not responsible for lifelong learning schemes therefore it does not provide specific funding for the purpose which you describe.

Farm Modernisation Grants

Mr Maginness asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why her Department adopted a 'first come, first served' approach to applications for farm modernisation grants; and for her assessment as to whether this approach is a fair and equitable means of distributing funds. (AQW 5358/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Application packs have been available from the 28th January for the Farm Modernisation Programme. Approximately 18,000 packs have been issued.

The Programme opened for applications on Tuesday 17 February morning at 9am. Applications have been received in to eight offices, Omagh, Enniskillen, Coleraine, Ballymena, Newry, Downpatrick, Armagh and Dungannon. The offices were set up to an exact specification to ensure that applications were processed in a unified and efficient manner.

The method for allocating funds has been debated over the last two years. My officials consulted widely with all stakeholders, the farming unions and other representatives, who unilaterally favoured this approach. If I may outline the difference in this method and traditional grant applications:

Traditionally, a farmer would have been asked to complete a fairly lengthy form and been asked to describe, using this example, "tell me in a hundred words why this item would modernise your farm". His application would then have been sent to an assessment panel who in turn would look at his form and score it. The uptake of this scheme as I have said has been 18,000, therefore a panel would look at potentially 18,000 forms, score them and then rank the applications. This would probably take, using these numbers, upwards of a year before an award could be made, never mind how the forms could actually be evaluated and scored.

I agreed to adopt this innovative approach, following a further review towards the end of 2008, because it was efficient and minimised the red tape for the farmer. Instead of a farmer having to get quotations for items, my officials compiled a list of equipment, which was consulted on and which were already deemed to modernise farming and horticulture businesses. This meant the farmer didn't have to complete this part of the form. Having removed this exercise, again after consultation, the method for actually awarding grant was discussed widely

with all stakeholders. One option was to go for random stratified sampling. This was discounted because it lacked a satisfactory audit trail. Whereas the first come first served option was to be receipted giving a date and exact time of processing across any office in the north of Ireland.

The Programme targets specifically the introduction of new technologies and innovation, improved animal health and welfare, increased hygiene control and product storage, enhanced occupational safety and environmental status, increased business and energy. It is designed to increase both economic growth and labour productivity.

The rationale for this specific targeting was, given the budgetary constraint, an evident potential to realise modernisation over a larger number of farms through small scale grants with an immediate effect. In addition, low farm incomes and the affordability of the match funding requirement plus the potential to complement the very significant investment in built infrastructure under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme.

To summarise then, I do believe that this methodology is indeed fair and equitable.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Safety Certification: Introduction of

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4102/09, to outline the timeframe for the introduction of safety certification. (AQW 4502/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): I currently hope to introduce the safety certification scheme, provided for under the Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, in the 2009 calendar year. This timetable remains subject to the normal statutory processes including the approval, by the Northern Ireland Assembly, of relevant subordinate legislation.

Building Ulster-Scots Links

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with his counterpart in Scotland or the Scottish First Minister about building Ulster-Scots links. (AQW 4555/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I met with Minister Fabiani, the Scottish Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture when she visited Belfast on 8 September 2008. At that meeting we discussed several Ulster-Scots / Scots issues which included roads infrastructure and ferry links between Northern Ireland and Scotland, broadcasting and improving Ulster-Scots cultural and heritage links.

Gaelic Athletic Association: Anniversary of

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action his Department is taking to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Gaelic Athletic Association. (AQW 4677/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster Council of the GAA launched their proposed 125th Anniversary Celebrations on Tuesday 3rd February.

I understand a range of events have been organised to mark the anniversary.

My Department has not been approached regarding the commemorations.

Irish-Language and Ulster-Scots Events

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many (i) Irish language; and (ii) Ulster-Scots events, he has attended since taking up office. (AQW 4679/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since becoming Minister I have received three invitations to Irish language events but have been unable to attend due to diary commitments. I have received 19 invitations to Ulster-Scots events of which I have attended eight.

Irish-Gaelic and Scots-Gaelic Languages

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what work his Department has undertaken in conjunction with the Scottish Executive in relation to Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic languages. (AQW 4745/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has worked with the Scottish Executive and counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in the establishment and funding of the 'Colmcille' organisation. The aim of 'Colmcille' is to foster support for the Gaelic language and develop links between Gaelic Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. As part of a tripartite funding agreement my department contributes £180k to this activity annually.

Officials have also engaged with the Scottish Executive on Irish language and Scots Gàidhlig issues at British-Irish Council Language Sector sub-group meetings.

Language Arts Officers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the two new posts for language arts officers replaces the Arts Council post of Traditional Arts Officer. (AQW 4789/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Arts Council has advised that the Traditional Arts Officer post was last filled in September 2007, and has historically been a part-time one.

In February 2008 the Arts Council sought to fill two part-time Language Arts Officers (one Irish language and one Ulster-Scots). The posts were advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, Newsletter and Lá (an Irish language newspaper).

The Arts Council received very few applications for the posts, and the candidates invited for interview withdrew their applications before the interviews were held. The Arts Council was therefore unsuccessful in filling these posts, and has advised that it will not be appointing two language arts officers.

The Arts Council is currently restructuring its Arts Development Department and intends to advertise for a part time Traditional Arts Officer in the next six months. There has been no shortfall in support for the traditional arts sector. Support is currently provided by Arts Council staff with relevant knowledge of the sector.

Re-Imaging Communities Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any new funding arrangements for the ICCP for the next financial year in relation to the re-imaging communities programme funded by the Arts Council. (AQW 4813/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Intra-Community Cohesion Project (ICCP) was awarded £48,354 under the Re-Imaging Communities Programme in November 2008 towards its project - Re-imaging Kilcooley. To date £24,177 has been paid out to the group with the remainder to be paid as the project progresses.

As applicants can have only one live application at a time, the group will be eligible to re-apply when its current project is completed.

The Arts Council intends to run a reduced Re-Imaging Communities Programme in 2009/10 using the remaining £750k of Lottery funding.

Programme for Government Targets

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what risk assessment he has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4828/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department's Programme for Government (PfG) targets are managed in line with DCAL's Risk Management Framework.

In addition, a Public Service Agreement (PSA) Board has been established within my Department to monitor progress against DCAL's commitments under the PfG, including reviewing all relevant risks where appropriate.

Finally, as with all other Departments, DCAL's progress against its PfG commitments is monitored on a six monthly basis.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many meetings he has held with each of the three MEPs since devolution. (AQW 4859/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since becoming Minister I have met once with Jim Allister MEP and my predecessor, Edwin Poots MLA, met once with Bairbre de Brun MEP as part of a Sinn Féin delegation.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the MLAs who indicated to him and his Department their support for the proposed stadium at Long Kesh. (AQW 4954/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Neither I nor my Department has a list of MLAs who have indicated their support for the proposal to have a multi-sports stadium at the Maze.

Maze Site

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4594, to detail (i) his Department's involvement with Bovale Developments or the Millwood Company; and (ii) any monies paid to the companies. (AQW 5077/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has had no funding relationship with either of these two companies.

Newtownards Library

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a time scale for commencement of work on Newtownards Library. (AQW 5138/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is committed to the principle of a replacement library for Newtownards, and funding is profiled within the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland for this purpose.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board is currently revising an Economic Appraisal for improved library facilities in Newtownards. Several matters remain outstanding before this can be finalised. After the completion of the Economic Appraisal it will take a minimum of 12 to 15 months for detailed designs to be developed and planning permission to be secured before construction can commence on site.

The likely timescale and cost of the project will not be known until the Economic Appraisal is finalised.

Indigenous Language Strategy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of the Indigenous Language Strategy. (AQO 2087/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group has begun consideration of a strategy for Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages. This strategy aims to protect, enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and Irish language.

I am pleased to report that a framework on which such a strategy will be built is emerging.

I intend to present an initial paper to the Executive Committee on this matter in the very near future.

British Identity and Culture: Promotion of

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the investment and initiatives being supported by his Department to promote British identity and culture. (AQO 2094/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is tasked with expressing the cultural richness and diversity of Northern Ireland, and affects this through the provision of strategic leadership and resources for the promotion and sustainable development of the culture, arts and leisure sectors. I can assure the Member that, where it is possible, steps are also taken, by my Department and its arms length bodies, to promote British identity and culture. For example:

- DCAL has delegated responsibility to coordinate and facilitate Northern Ireland's response to the London 2012 Olympics. A 2012 Strategy has been developed to ensure that Northern Ireland maximises the benefits arising out of the Olympic and Paralympic Games;
- Furthermore, I recently wrote to the Minister for Sport at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, requesting that he ask the British Olympic Association to give consideration to a suitable re-titling of the British Olympic team name in order to ensure that Northern Ireland's role within the team is fully recognised;
- The service provided by National Museums Northern Ireland has particular regard to the heritage of Northern Ireland but, through its collections, it also includes significant national and international dimensions;
- The Arts Council and the British Council work together to raise awareness of the arts from Northern Ireland on the international stage.

Regional Art Gallery

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans his Department has to invest in a regional art gallery. (AQO 2095/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is supportive, in principle, of a regional arts gallery. I am aware that the absence of a National Gallery is viewed by many as a significant gap in Northern Ireland's cultural infrastructure.

However, the necessary funding for such a facility has not been secured under ISNI 2.

Before any decision can be made in this regard, considerable preliminary work is required. This will include the development of a feasibility study to identify, consider and cost possible options and will also require the preparation of business cases and the progression of these through the approval process.

In the development of any future plans, the Department will work in partnership with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and National Museums Northern Ireland.

Orange Lodge

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions have taken place between the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland about making the unique records held by the Orange Lodge more available to the general public. (AQO 2096/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland have held a number of discussions over recent years on how to preserve and make available the unique archival heritage of the Orange Order in Ireland. PRONI has provided advice and guidance on preservation and storage issues and undertook a pilot digitisation project for the Grand Orange Lodge.

I met with representatives of the Grand Orange Lodge and officials from the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in December to explore a way to take this forward. At this meeting it was agreed that the Public Record Office will provide assistance and guidance to the Grand Orange Lodge to undertake a survey of the records held locally by Orange lodges and districts across Northern Ireland.

This will represent the first significant step in a project to identify and catalogue the historical records held by the Orange Order across the province.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he approved the 2009/10 business cases for both the Language and Waterways North/South Bodies at the recent North South Ministerial Council meeting in Enniskillen. (AQO 2098/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The council noted the draft 2009 Business Plan for Waterways and Language, which is under consideration by both Sponsor Departments and Finance Departments in line with budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. Both Sponsor Departments will work together to finalise the Business Plans and bring them forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting.

Broadcasting: Devolution of

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to raise the issue of the devolution of broadcasting with his counterpart in the UK Government. (AQO 2099/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Broadcasting responsibilities and powers remain a reserved matter. However, I am committed where possible, to ensuring that the specific characteristics and needs of Northern Ireland are fully considered in the development of broadcasting policy.

I do not have any plans at present to raise the issue of the devolution of broadcasting with my counterpart in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

However, I have agreed to a joint meeting with my counterparts in the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly, to discuss the future of broadcasting and how the needs of our nations are fully taken into account by the UK Government. A suitable date for this meeting is being arranged.

My Department has also responded to the consultation process on the Ofcom Review of Public Service Broadcasting. I am pleased to advise that Ofcom has listened to our representations and subsequently amended the original proposals for Northern Ireland in its final recommendations to the UK Government. The recommendations were published on 21 January 2009.

Music Performing Arts Society

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to the development of a Music Performing Arts Society; and what assessment his Department has made of the current arrangements, and potential improvements in the collection and distribution that could occur if a local organisation was set up to collect and distribute royalties. (AQO 2100/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of the recently established Northern Ireland Music Rights Society and its wish to act as a royalty collection agency here. I can confirm that Edwin Poots, my predecessor, advised those involved in that organisation to prepare a feasibility study, which would inform if and how this matter may be taken forward.

When the feasibility study is received by my Department it will be given careful consideration and it will assist in making an informed assessment of the current arrangements and the potential impact of the establishment of a local royalty collection agency.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what long-term strategy for sport his Department will implement following his decision not to proceed with the planned multi-sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQO 2101/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), has developed a new 10 year strategy for sport and physical

recreation for Northern Ireland. This Strategy provides a high level framework for the development of sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland and includes the need to the provision of modern and commercially viable sports stadia. The new Strategy has been forwarded to the Northern Ireland Executive for consideration at a future meeting.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of whether the development of the Ulster-Scots community infrastructure, based on sound community development principles, will be a priority in the strategy and associated funding programme of the Ulster-Scots Agency. (AQO 2102/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster-Scots Agency is committed to progressing the development of the Ulster-Scots community infrastructure and its aims towards achieving this are reflected in its corporate and Business Plans.

The Agency recognises the development of the Ulster-Scots community infrastructure based on sound community development principles is essential to the advancement of Ulster-Scots activity, and work in this area is on-going.

My understanding is that at the first Board meeting this year the Board tasked the Chief Executive with bringing forward an integrated community development strategy to be finalised by April 2009.

Community empowerment and the development of the community infrastructure were identified as priorities at the Ulster-Scots Futuresearch conference in 2002 and again at the Ulster-Scots Community Vision Conference in 2008.

Irish Language

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the reasons for the delay in developing a strategy to promote and enhance the Irish language. (AQO 2103/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since the return to devolution my Department has considered responses to consultations on Irish and Ulster-Scots issues.

I intend to present an initial paper to the Executive Committee on this matter in the very near future.

Traditional Arts

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action his Department is taking to promote access to the traditional arts among young people. (AQO 2104/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL funding for arts is disbursed by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

The Arts Council seeks to promote access to all artforms among young people, including the traditional arts. Whilst there is no specific funding programme designed for the purpose, the Cultural Traditions Programme provides grants for projects enabling young people under the age of 25 to explore and understand more about their common cultural heritage and to gain a respect for cultural diversity through the arts. Projects funded through this programme include activities which promote access to the traditional arts.

The Arts Council has provided £1.19m of funding through the Cultural Traditions programme from 2005/06 to date. Funding has increased by 19% between 2005/06 and the current year.

Thirty-one thousand individuals participated in projects funded through this programme in 2007/08, 80% of whom were aged 11 or below.

A number of organisations have also been supported through the Arts Council's other funding programmes to provide opportunities for young people to engage in traditional arts activities.

The Arts Council will continue its important work in promoting access to the traditional arts among our young people.

Shared Future

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department carries out its responsibility to create a shared future. (AQO 2105/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Improving relations between, and within, communities in Northern Ireland is a long term goal of Government.

My Department is working to promote good relations and an inclusive society through its contributions to the Shared Future Triennial Action Plan and the Implementation Action Plan for the Racial Equality Strategy.

EDUCATION

Academic Selection

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on what will replace academic selection. (AQW 4625/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): De réir an ráitis a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009, tá treoir foilsithe agam ar phróiseas an aistrithe ó bhunscolaíocht go hiarbhunscolaíocht i mí Mheán Fómhair 2010. Déanann an Treoir seo moltaí maidir le critéir ba chóir a úsáid nuair atá iontráil chuig iarbhunscoileanna sa bhliain 2010 i gceist agus tá na moltaí seo faoi chomhairliúchán.

In accordance with my statement to the Assembly on 2 February 2009 I have published guidance on the process of transfer from primary to post-primary education in September 2010. This guidance makes recommendations in relation to criteria to be used for the purpose of admission to post-primary schools in 2010 and these recommendations are the subject of consultation.

In particular, the guidance recommends that all schools use as their first criterion a measure that will ensure that applicants entitled to free school meals gain admission at the same rate as all other applicants. Thereafter the guidance recommends the following menu of criteria, in no particular order:

- Sibling;
- Eldest Child;
- Feeder/named primary school;
- Parish (with nearest suitable school);
- Catchment Area (with nearest suitable school);
- Nearest Suitable School; and
- Random Selection (tie-breaker).

The closing date for receipt of comments is 27 April 2009.

Primary School Enrolment Figures

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the enrolment figures for each primary school in East Antrim, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4629/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

ENROLMENT FIGURES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2004/05 – 2008/09

School Name	Year				
	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08	2008/ 09
Carnalbanagh Ps	48	48	59	52	46

School Name	Year				
	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08	2008/ 09
Larne And Inver Ps	218	212	211	200	183
Carrickfergus Model Ps	408	408	407	414	410
Olderfleet Ps	191	193	189	174	176
Woodburn Ps	185	192	191	194	194
Mullaghdubh Ps	63	59	49	45	44
Eden Ps	204	207	204	200	205
Glynn Ps	57	54	50	56	60
Ballycarry Ps	117	124	119	107	102
Greenisland Ps	399	394	373	381	379
Carrickfergus Central Ps	217	195	190	160	150
Whiteabbey Ps	411	408	411	412	409
Upper Ballyboley Ps	63	61	54	54	46
Sunnylands Ps	197	187	166	152	141
Moyle Ps	317	321	297	308	310
Whitehead Ps	397	408	388	395	400
King's Park Ps	363	357	344	356	327
Linn Ps	336	346	419	426	401
Glenarm Ps	22	20	0	0	0
Victoria Ps	606	582	555	549	512
Toreagh Ps	77	84	80	82	79
Silverstream Ps	136	143	144	128	117
Antiville Ps	58	0	0	0	0
Hollybank Ps	198	199	183	174	181
Woodlawn Ps	298	284	287	281	281
Oakfield Ps	373	365	360	357	359
Cairncastle Ps	119	130	136	116	109
Seaview Ps	94	90	88	80	68
St Anthony's Ps, Larne	126	124	109	105	93
St John's Ps, Ballymena	203	204	196	186	186
Lourdes Ps	31	38	39	42	45
St James' Ps, Newtownabbey	250	272	264	277	278
St Nicholas' Ps, Carrickfergus	114	107	106	107	111
St Macnissi's Ps, Larne	215	216	219	215	211
Kilcoan Ps	81	76	81	66	63
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Ps	35	41	41	47	45
Corran Integrated Ps	187	186	201	213	208
Acorn Integrated Ps	229	229	230	229	229

Source: Annual school census

Note: Figures include nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

Children with Hearing Difficulties

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many children in primary schools are registered as having hearing difficulties. (AQW 4631/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS WHO ARE REGISTERED AS HAVING A HEARING RELATED SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEED – 2007/08

Special Educational Need	No. of pupils
Severe/profound hearing loss	103
Mild/moderate hearing loss	259
Total	362

Source: Annual school census.

Note:

1. Figures include pupils in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
2. Figures relate to pupils at Stage 1 – 5 of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. However, some of the pupils at SEN stages 1 and 2 with these conditions may have been recorded at a more general level and therefore not included here.

Children with Vision Difficulties

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many children in primary schools are registered as having vision difficulties. (AQW 4632/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The answer is contained in the table below.

PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS WHO ARE REGISTERED AS HAVING A VISION RELATED SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEED – 2007/08

Special Educational Need	No. of pupils
Blind	*
Partially sighted	#
Total	165

Source: Annual school census.

Note:

1. Figures include pupils in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
2. Figures relate to pupils at Stage 1 – 5 of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. However, some of the pupils at SEN stages 1 and 2 with these conditions may have been recorded at a more general level and therefore not included here.
3. * relates to fewer than 5 cases.
4. # means a figure ≥ 5 has been treated to prevent disclosure of a small number elsewhere.

Newly Qualified Teachers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many newly qualified teachers have yet to take up a teaching position. (AQW 4667/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí 725 céimí múinteoireachta sa bhliain 2008, agus ní dhearnadh próiseáil ar 155 acu trí phárolla na múinteoirí buana nó trí phárolla na múinteoirí sealadacha.

There were 725 teaching graduates in 2008 of whom 155 have not been processed through either the permanent or the temporary teachers' payroll.

Review of the Catholic Teaching Certificate

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education when the review of the Catholic teaching certificate will be complete. (AQW 4668/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuirfear i gcrích an t-athbhreithniú ar dheiseanna earcaíochta in earnáil na Múinteoireachta atá ann anois agus a bheidh ann as seo amach i mí Eanáir 2010.

The review of current and future recruitment opportunities in the Teaching sector will be completed by January 2010.

Its terms of reference are:-

- To forecast the number of teaching vacancies likely to arise over the next 3 years, analysed by school type and sector.
- To estimate the proportion of those vacancies for which a certificate in religious studies is likely to be an eligibility criterion.
- To identify the routes by which teachers may obtain a certificate, either as part of their initial teacher education, or subsequently.
- To identify any barriers to obtaining a certificate that could give rise to inequality.
- To recommend as appropriate, measures to promote equality of opportunity for teachers.

Teachers: Attacks Against

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many attacks against teachers have been reported in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools in each of the last two years. (AQW 4670/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní bhailíonn an Roinn Oideachais an t-eolas a iarradh.

The Department of Education does not collect the information requested.

However, statistics on the reasons for suspension and expulsion are gathered each school year from Education and Library Boards. The tables below provide the number of occasions where pupils were suspended for verbal abuse or physical attack on staff, in primary and post-primary schools, for the last two years:-

NUMBER OF OCCASIONS PUPILS WERE SUSPENDED, IN THE 2006/07 SCHOOL YEAR, FOR VERBAL ABUSE OF STAFF AND PHYSICAL ATTACK ON STAFF

	Primary	Post-Primary
Verbal abuse of staff	45	1,784
Physical attack on staff	66	182

NUMBER OF OCCASIONS PUPILS WERE SUSPENDED, IN THE 2007/08 SCHOOL YEAR, FOR VERBAL ABUSE OF STAFF AND PHYSICAL ATTACK ON STAFF

	Primary	Post-Primary
Verbal abuse of staff	31	1,768
Physical attack on staff	54	132

Notes

1. These figures relate to all pupils undertaking Key Stage 1-4 in primary and post-primary schools.
2. The information reflects the number of individual suspensions, as opposed to the number of pupils suspended.

Transfer 2010 Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education for an estimate of how much the proposed 'Transfer 2010' scheme will cost; and from where in her budget these resources will be allocated. (AQW 4698/09)

The Minister of Education: Beidh na costais a bhaineann le socruithe d'Aistriú 2010, bunaithe ar threoir a foilsíodh ar 2 Feabhra 2009, ar scála atá comhchosúil leis na costais sin a tabhaíodh sna blianta roimhe seo, agus is í an phríomhdhifríocht a bheidh ann ná easpa caiteachais ar riarachán theist lárcomheagraithe a éascaíonn roghnú acadúil.

Arrangements for Transfer 2010, informed by guidance published on 2 February 2009, will involve costs of a scale similar to those incurred in previous years, with the main difference being the absence of expenditure on administering a centrally co-ordinated test to facilitate academic selection.

Excluding the administration of the selection test, the annual transfer process, which is largely an Education and Library Board funded service, costs in the region of £1m to administer. This is provided for within the overall annual budget set for the Boards. I do not anticipate the need for any additional resources to administer Transfer 2010 as the process (from the point of view of the Boards, and ESA in due course) will be very similar to previous years.

Primary 6 Children

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that P6 children receive an education that will point them in the direction of future employment. (AQW 4740/09)

The Minister of Education: The revised curriculum which I am introducing will better prepare our young people for life and work in the 21st century, providing them with the education and skills they need to take their place in society, including in employment. Developing the core skills of literacy and numeracy as well as the wider knowledge and skills that our young people need for life and work are key objectives of the revised curriculum from Year 1 onwards.

At Key Stage 2, which includes Year 6, employment is specifically covered through the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding area of learning of the revised curriculum, where pupils can learn about the range of jobs and work carried out by different people and develop skills in areas including decision-making, in teamworking and innovation.

Careers Education is also an important part of the curriculum and last month I, together with the Minister for Employment and Learning, launched the Careers, Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy. This is designed to support teachers and pupils at every stage. It is accompanied by a practical framework that helps teachers to make effective links within the primary curriculum to career choices and careers information at a level appropriate to primary-aged children.

Chomh maith leis sin, tá sé tábhachtach go bhfaigheann scoileanna an tacaíocht agus an spreagadh atá de dhíth orthu lena chinntiú go mbaineann gach páiste a c(h)umas iomlán amach agus go bhfeabhsaítear caighdeáin, sa litearthacht agus san uimhearthacht go háirithe, do na daoine óga sin go háirithe a mbíonn baic orthu agus atá i mbaol tearcghnóthachtaí.

Additionally, it is important that schools receive the support and encouragement they need to ensure that every child reaches her or his full potential and that standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy, are improved, especially for those young people who face barriers and are at risk of underachievement. My Department is currently finalising a new school improvement strategy and will be following this with a complementary strategy for raising attainment in literacy and numeracy. I want to ensure that every child leaves school with the standards of literacy and numeracy and the wider knowledge and skills they need to make their full contribution to the economy and to society.

Donaghadee High School: Special Needs Pupils

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans to accommodate the special needs pupils following the closure of Donaghadee High School. (AQW 4771/09)

The Minister of Education: Ba chóir don Chomhalta féachaint ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar an cheist a chuir sé roimhe seo AQW 1169/09 a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 17 Deireadh Fómhair 2008.

I would refer the Member to my answer to his previous question AQW 1163/09 published in the Official Report on 17 October 2008.

Grammar Schools: Voluntary

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education how much public money has been provided to each of the Voluntary Grammar schools (i) through each Education and Library board; or (ii) by the Department of Education, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4788/09)

The Minister of Education: Leagtar amach sna táblaí thíos sonraí faoi chistiú caipitil agus cistiú athfhillteach a eisíodh chuig gach Scoil Ghramadaí Dheonach i ngach bliain le cúig bliana anuas.

The tables below set out details of the capital and recurrent funding issued to each of the Voluntary Grammar schools in each of the last five years.

The recurrent funding per school in each year includes amounts made available under Local Management of Schools Formulae and funds held by the Department which are distributed to Voluntary Grammar schools in the course of the year to meet costs such as teacher substitution and special education needs. It also includes funding which Voluntary Grammar schools receive from the Department to reflect their additional responsibilities as employers of all staff and in respect of landlord maintenance, insurance, audit and accountancy, and administration (the Education and Library boards meet these spending responsibilities centrally for their controlled and maintained schools). The figures provided exclude funding for home-to-school transport which is a centrally held resource and not attributable to individual schools. Full analysis of the figures provided is available from the schools' Outturn Statements which are published on the DE website from 2004/05 onwards.

		VGS FORMULA			
		2003/04		2004/05	
Sch Ref No.	School	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital
142-0018	Belfast Bloomfield Collegiate	2,462,635	0	2,590,177	37,464
142-0020	Belfast Campbell College	3,330,035	410,640	3,376,699	935,472
142-0021	Belfast St Mary's CBS	4,225,433	0	4,273,715	65,035
142-0022	Belfast Methodist College	6,790,369	0	6,982,407	10,505
142-0027	Belfast Royal Academical Inst.	3,786,810	718,251	4,024,676	602,114
142-0028	Belfast Royal Academy	5,072,364	0	5,318,523	0
142-0029	Belfast St Dominic's High	3,604,191	87,987	3,620,552	130,995
142-0030	Belfast St Malachy's College	3,583,700	269,050	3,785,752	91,311
142-0082	Belfast Dominican College	3,634,764	3,100,562	3,723,493	1,963,331
142-0089	Belfast Strathearn	2,705,084	43,929	2,867,493	6,015
142-0095	Dunmurry Rathmore Grammar	4,469,544	5,366,084	4,619,185	4,271,254
142-0264	Belfast Victoria College	3,150,483	67,962	3,322,298	76,709
142-0265	Belfast Hunterhouse College	2,453,975	315,320	2,600,680	43,782
142-0277	Belfast Aquinas	2,772,024	785,321	2,844,192	558,693
242-0041	Mount Lourdes Convent Grammar	3,291,717	2,279,469	3,517,130	699,303
242-0042	Enniskillen Portora Royal	1,800,678	10,740	1,896,369	27,516
242-0043	Enniskillen St Michael's College	2,728,704	735,972	2,899,237	77,757
242-0052	Derry Thornhill College	5,240,862	5,104,299	5,462,206	291,853
242-0054	Derry St Columb's College	5,597,625	128,816	5,710,543	207,233

		VGS FORMULA			
		2003/04		2004/05	
Sch Ref No.	School	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital
242-0064	Omagh CBS Grammar	3,651,624	0	3,672,928	0
242-0065	Omagh Loreto College	3,428,570	41,400	3,674,137	53,368
242-0072	Strabane Convent Grammar	1,583,325	3,428	1,745,289	6,560
242-0229	Foyle & Londonderry College	3,238,140	22,111	3,415,155	6,971
242-0287	Derry Lumen Christi College	2,808,309	297,982	3,106,972	15,431
342-0010	Ballymena St Louis Grammar	3,290,068	40,283	3,497,859	42,924
342-0011	Ballymena Academy	4,201,624	117,397	4,382,824	949,924
342-0012	Ballymoney Dalriada	3,108,284	49,882	3,223,631	136,102
342-0032	Coleraine Academical Inst	2,669,776	92,873	2,671,894	200,000
342-0034	Coleraine Loreto College	2,803,774	56,464	2,989,697	125,051
342-0046	Larne Grammar	2,636,230	62,756	2,816,183	61,965
342-0058	Magherafelt Rainey Endowed	2,643,138	0	2,713,052	14,030
342-0068	Portstewart Dominican College	1,696,724	23,500	1,806,834	66,556
342-0077	Belfast High	3,217,851	497,198	3,400,215	1,644,638
342-0080	Magherafelt St Mary's Grammar	3,960,927	151,638	4,098,447	0
342-0094	Garron Tower St Mac Nissi's College	2,212,954	0	2,413,013	21,855
442-0015	Bangor Grammar	3,256,195	118,590	3,358,712	30,106
442-0044	Holywood Sullivan Upper	3,939,459	574,974	4,115,173	1,135,415
442-0050	Lisburn Friend's	3,528,777	542,843	3,740,359	268,527
442-0051	Lisburn The Wallace	4,132,201	577,353	4,350,351	99,805
442-0086	Ballynahinch Assumption College	3,264,010	1,282,162	3,399,513	1,443,594
442-0088	Downpatrick St Patrick's Grammar	2,587,180	156,270	2,719,694	13,582
442-0259	Belfast Our Lady & St Patrick's	4,300,475	138,066	4,463,097	97,405
542-0038	Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (B)	3,141,660	174,162	0	153,201
542-0039	Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (G)	2,951,793	3,658	0	12,298
542-0045	Kilkeel St Louis' Grammar	2,010,580	35,384	2,165,930	57,661
542-0056	Lurgan St Michael's Senior High	2,229,368	417	2,383,276	7,746
542-0059	Newry Abbey Grammar	3,058,150	25,051	3,307,427	106,875
542-0060	Newry Our Lady's Grammar	3,086,544	7,218	3,284,254	162,706
542-0062	Newry St Colman's College	3,012,881	517,801	3,203,436	921,618
542-0073	Donaghmore St Joseph's Grammar	1,890,026	150,403	1,932,448	181,040
542-0076	Newry Sacred Heart Grammar	3,150,296	0	3,281,560	0
542-0260	Dungannon Royal	2,256,916	1,551,221	2,338,298	432,591
542-0263	Armagh Royal	2,456,385	0	2,576,821	0
542-0268	Armagh St Patrick's Grammar	2,761,839	1,376,486	2,952,704	65,162
542-0304	St. Patrick's Acad.Dungannon	348,449	0	6,295,930	0
	Total	175,215,499	28,113,373	182,932,437	18,631,052

Sch Ref No.	School	2005/06		2006/07	
		Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital
142-0018	Belfast Bloomfield Collegiate	2,703,675	74,026	2,839,447	12,126
142-0020	Belfast Campbell College	3,709,393	570,492	3,954,916	223,618
142-0021	Belfast St Mary's CBS	4,563,266	51,148	4,850,030	238,160
142-0022	Belfast Methodist College	7,577,248	0	7,805,797	32,152
142-0027	Belfast Royal Academical Inst.	4,341,280	387,837	4,404,625	250,170
142-0028	Belfast Royal Academy	5,598,571	30,075	5,852,749	0
142-0029	Belfast St Dominic's High	3,957,009	22,151	4,206,004	2,325,371
142-0030	Belfast St Malachy's College	4,205,174	170,515	4,283,270	267,438
142-0082	Belfast Dominican College	3,996,874	1,107,222	4,112,369	512,199
142-0089	Belfast Strathearn	3,114,778	150,062	3,202,158	44,190
142-0095	Dunmurry Rathmore Grammar	4,945,213	3,102,763	5,100,134	72,009
142-0264	Belfast Victoria College	3,624,818	209,319	3,769,672	2,615
142-0265	Belfast Hunterhouse College	2,829,025	227,994	2,948,183	70,904
142-0277	Belfast Aquinas	3,141,482	241,134	3,388,999	162,625
242-0041	Mount Lourdes Convent Grammar	3,594,678	2,944,868	3,677,893	1,339,896
242-0042	Enniskillen Portora Royal	2,135,071	62,660	2,129,057	9,554
242-0043	Enniskillen St Michael's College	2,955,090	279,696	3,094,725	56,394
242-0052	Derry Thornhill College	5,909,194	432,976	6,114,089	142,587
242-0054	Derry St Columb's College	6,154,334	171,488	6,449,530	278,784
242-0064	Omagh CBS Grammar	3,920,141	28,266	4,002,341	0
242-0065	Omagh Loreto College	3,886,065	94,819	3,829,169	112,470
242-0072	Strabane Convent Grammar	880,155	1,529	0	170,963
242-0229	Foyle & Londonderry College	3,621,751	56,311	3,538,109	22,157
242-0287	Derry Lumen Christi College	3,336,714	60,668	3,621,543	67,786
342-0010	Ballymena St Louis Grammar	3,781,390	114,428	3,963,126	1,165,069
342-0011	Ballymena Academy	4,698,220	757,959	4,884,912	150,083
342-0012	Ballymoney Dalriada	3,511,247	337,026	3,620,826	135,305
342-0032	Coleraine Academical Inst	2,797,988	41,694	2,791,229	80,704
342-0034	Coleraine Loreto College	3,170,197	406,880	3,225,650	44,782
342-0046	Larne Grammar	2,951,058	19,913	3,096,617	43,896
342-0058	Magherafelt Rainey Endowed	2,888,577	15,863	3,024,305	13,512
342-0068	Portstewart Dominican College	1,905,187	11,878	2,013,769	0
342-0077	Belfast High	3,746,141	235,892	3,746,702	86,295
342-0080	Magherafelt St Mary's Grammar	4,564,487	167,792	4,750,192	303,522
342-0094	Garron Tower St Mac Nissi's College	2,565,509	1,088	2,619,956	0
442-0015	Bangor Grammar	3,626,164	60,573	3,739,217	101,853
442-0044	Holywood Sullivan Upper	4,416,037	393,138	4,575,212	614,098
442-0050	Lisburn Friend's	3,987,337	341,461	4,136,748	254,391

Sch Ref No.	School	2005/06		2006/07	
		Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital
442-0051	Lisburn The Wallace	4,669,278	208,342	4,768,838	143,232
442-0086	Ballynahinch Assumption College	3,576,541	188,409	3,714,009	2,063,526
442-0088	Downpatrick St Patrick's Grammar	2,949,473	43,412	2,995,619	20,022
442-0259	Belfast Our Lady & St Patrick's	4,800,504	9,295	4,943,335	5,102
542-0038	Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (B)	0	71,513	0	113,872
542-0039	Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (G)	0	3,567	0	113,438
542-0045	Kilkeel St Louis' Grammar	2,287,467	103,281	2,373,719	59,484
542-0056	Lurgan St Michael's Senior High	2,527,374	20,693	2,661,034	71,401
542-0059	Newry Abbey Grammar	3,569,262	66,984	3,664,394	310,178
542-0060	Newry Our Lady's Grammar	3,366,902	546,989	3,617,255	0
542-0062	Newry St Colman's College	3,475,621	952,175	3,681,646	1,903,130
542-0073	Donaghmore St Joseph's Grammar	2,097,079	116,052	2,145,512	39,344
542-0076	Newry Sacred Heart Grammar	3,462,489	4,866	3,600,719	354,681
542-0260	Dungannon Royal	2,548,667	5,000	2,613,429	0
542-0263	Armagh Royal	2,654,085	36,323	2,803,420	0
542-0268	Armagh St Patrick's Grammar	3,222,197	109,926	3,365,320	243,514
542-0304	St. Patrick's Acad.Dungannon	6,605,373	0	6,610,956	0
	TOTAL	195,122,849	15,870,432	200,922,472	14,848,602

Sch Ref No.	School	2007/08	
		Recurrent	Capital
142-0018	Belfast Bloomfield Collegiate	3,007,801	59,766
142-0020	Belfast Campbell College	4,056,845	326,359
142-0021	Belfast St Mary's CBS	4,870,166	18,891
142-0022	Belfast Methodist College	7,965,762	148,787
142-0027	Belfast Royal Academical Inst.	4,752,510	253,059
142-0028	Belfast Royal Academy	6,081,266	71,237
142-0029	Belfast St Dominic's High	4,279,027	6,044,051
142-0030	Belfast St Malachy's College	4,498,210	3,091
142-0082	Belfast Dominican College	4,352,893	460,788
142-0089	Belfast Strathearn	3,389,489	256,178
142-0095	Dunmurry Rathmore Grammar	5,325,150	277,027
142-0264	Belfast Victoria College	3,821,816	44,431
142-0265	Belfast Hunterhouse College	2,909,038	457,400
142-0277	Belfast Aquinas	3,642,507	71,534
242-0041	Mount Lourdes Convent Grammar	3,974,444	3,464,322
242-0042	Enniskillen Portora Royal	2,461,882	127,969
242-0043	Enniskillen St Michael's College	3,296,071	153,289
242-0052	Derry Thornhill College	6,577,723	227,066

Sch Ref No.	School	2007/08	
		Recurrent	Capital
242-0054	Derry St Columb's College	6,610,524	187,195
242-0064	Omagh CBS Grammar	4,254,911	121,547
242-0065	Omagh Loreto College	4,123,846	4,130
242-0072	Strabane Convent Grammar	0	0
242-0229	Foyle & Londonderry College	3,688,768	179,021
242-0287	Derry Lumen Christi College	3,777,848	345,786
342-0010	Ballymena St Louis Grammar	4,127,382	91,996
342-0011	Ballymena Academy	4,970,824	122,874
342-0012	Ballymoney Dalriada	3,771,074	40,960
342-0032	Coleraine Academical Inst	2,824,958	191,382
342-0034	Coleraine Loreto College	3,394,801	270,840
342-0046	Larne Grammar	3,177,145	11,280
342-0058	Magherafelt Rainey Endowed	3,118,443	103,516
342-0068	Portstewart Dominican College	2,151,835	15,457
342-0077	Belfast High	3,929,381	111,382
342-0080	Magherafelt St Mary's Grammar	5,017,706	462,936
342-0094	Garron Tower St Mac Nissi's College	2,636,815	73,132
442-0015	Bangor Grammar	4,138,117	61,532
442-0044	Holywood Sullivan Upper	4,760,062	875,941
442-0050	Lisburn Friend's	4,311,044	415,212
442-0051	Lisburn The Wallace	5,022,138	43,491
442-0086	Ballynahinch Assumption College	3,760,307	5,418,714
442-0088	Downpatrick St Patrick's Grammar	3,215,339	76,297
442-0259	Belfast Our Lady & St Patrick's	5,174,234	2,013,071
542-0038	Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (B)	0	21,212
542-0039	Dungannon St Patrick's Academy (G)	0	0
542-0045	Kilkeel St Louis' Grammar	2,533,801	33,930
542-0056	Lurgan St Michael's Senior High	2,676,512	9,180
542-0059	Newry Abbey Grammar	3,564,232	1,158,887
542-0060	Newry Our Lady's Grammar	3,732,446	44,062
542-0062	Newry St Colman's College	3,867,968	5,064,460
542-0073	Donaghmore St Joseph's Grammar	2,282,954	93,355
542-0076	Newry Sacred Heart Grammar	3,657,237	257,881
542-0260	Dungannon Royal	2,683,957	0
542-0263	Armagh Royal	2,861,286	0
542-0268	Armagh St Patrick's Grammar	3,601,439	358,665
542-0304	St. Patrick's Acad.Dungannon	6,748,804	0
	Total	209,430,734	30,744,570

Note: Funding includes Formula Allocation, Excepted Items (Resources Held Centrally), Capital Expenditure and School Milk and Meals (excluding equipment).

Educational Psychologists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education how many children are awaiting an assessment by an educational psychologist in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 4798/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas na figiúirí is déanaí atá ar fáil ó na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne maidir le líon na bpáistí a bhí ag fanacht ar mheasúnú riachtanas speisialta i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2008:-

The latest figures available from the Education and Library Boards regarding the number of children who are currently awaiting special needs assessment are as at October 2008 and are as follows:-

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
267	593	421	516	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, pre-school and examination arrangements.

Derry/Londonderry: Reading Centre

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education how many children are awaiting support from the Reading Centre in Derry/Londonderry; and what is the anticipated timescale for the Reading Centre to be able to provide support for the children currently on the waiting list. (AQW 4806/09)

The Minister of Education: The chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board has informed me that 156 children in the Derry city area are currently awaiting support from the Reading Centre, with an additional 107 in the wider Co Derry area.

However, these children should be taught in their own school in a way that addresses their literacy difficulties. Additionally teachers can get specific advice from the service to assist with the teaching of children on the waiting list.

Nuair a chuirtear san aireamh raon na n-idirghabhálacha atá ar fáil do scoileanna, níl aon amscála ar leith ann maidir le tacaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí ar atreoraíodh chuig an Ionad iad.

Given the variety of interventions available to schools there is no specific timescale for supporting children referred to the Centre.

School Transport

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to provide free places on school transport going past the children's home for those children that attend a local parish school of their parent's choice that is not necessarily their closest primary school. (AQW 4810/09)

The Minister of Education: The current home to school transport policy requires Education and Library Boards to provide a transport service for children who meet the criteria laid down in the arrangements. However, the current policy includes a provision whereby spare seating capacity on Education and Library Board buses may be awarded on a concessionary basis to pupils who are otherwise ineligible to receive school transport assistance.

The decision regarding whether or not to provide concessionary transport to individual pupils is entirely an operational matter for the relevant Education and Library Board.

Ní sholáthróidh boird suíocháin lamhálaí do dhaltai neamh-incháilithe atá ag iarraidh taistil níos faide ná an scoil is cóngaraí is oiriúnaí dóibh, mar gheall ar an iarmhairt dhiúltach a d'fhéadfaí bheith ann ar inmharthanacht na scoile atá níos cóngaraí dóibh. Níl aon phleananna agam athrú a dhéanamh ar na socruithe reatha.

Boards will not provide concessionary seats to ineligible pupils who seek to travel beyond their nearest suitable school, as to do so could have a potentially damaging effect on the viability of the nearer school. I have no plans to change the current arrangements.

CCEA Test Paper

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what representations she received in relation to the CCEA test paper; and to list all the organisation that have requested that this test be used. (AQW 4824/09)

The Minister of Education: The issue of using the CCEA test which I commissioned as a contingency measure, and later withdrew on 2 February 2009 along with my proposals for Transfer 2010, has been the subject of correspondence from three organisations – the Governing Bodies Association, the Catholic Heads Association and the Commission for Catholic Education.

Ní féidir leis an Roinn Oideachais (DE) teist a sholáthar a úsáidfear i gcomhthéacs iontrála, gan chreat dleathach bheith ann a thugann sainmhíniú ar an úsáid sin. De cheal chomhaontú an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin ar shocrúithe d'Aistriú 2010, ní bheidh aon teist á soláthar ag DE.

The Department of Education (DE) cannot provide a test for use in an admissions context without a legal framework defining that use. In the absence of Executive agreement on arrangements for Transfer 2010 there will therefore be no DE-provided test.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education if her Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4841/09)

The Minister of Education: Tacaíonn an Roinn Oideachais go mór leis an sprioc maidir le híocaíochtaí a dhéanamh laistigh de dheich lá oibre. Bhí treoir eisithe mí na Nollag 2008 ag an Roinn, laistigh den Roinn agus chuig NDPBanna a bhí maoinithe ag DE, ag cur béime ar thábhacht na sprice nua seo agus gur gá do na Brainsí a chinntiú go ndéanfar proiseáil ar íocaíochtaí gan mhoill mhíchuí.

The Department of Education strongly supports the target of making payments within ten working days. Guidance was issued by the Department both internally within the Department and to DE funded NDPBs in December 2008 stressing the importance of this new target and the need for Branches to ensure payments are processed without undue delay.

Monthly monitoring and reporting against this new target has been introduced by the Department, however it is not possible to present statistics against the target at this point.

Irish-Language and Mainstream Primary Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how much money is allocated per pupil in (i) mainstream primary schools; (ii) Irish medium schools; and (iii) Irish units attached to mainstream primary schools. (AQW 4846/09)

The Minister of Education: Faoin Fhoirmle Cómhaoinithe, bíonn leibhéil cistithe dá samhail le fáil, a dhíríonn isteach ar riachtanais atá aitheanta, ag gach scoil a bhfuil tosca dá samhail acu. Bíonn costais sa bhreis ag bunscoileanna Gaelscolaíochta, costais a bhaineann leis an soláthar ar leith atá acu agus cuidíonn an Fhoirmle Cómhaoinithe le tacaíocht sa bhreis a chur ar fáil dóibh a léiríonn na costais atá bainte le forbairt ar abháir curaclaim ag leis na costais sa bhreis a thabhaítear nuair a mhúintear Béarla ag Eochairchéim 2.

Under the Common Funding Formula, all schools with similar circumstances receive similar levels of funding, to address identified need. Irish-medium primary schools have additional costs associated with their particular type of provision and the Common Funding Formula provides for extra support for these schools to reflect the costs associated with the development of curriculum materials and to recognise the additional costs incurred in teaching English at Key Stage 2.

Figures shown in the table below refer to the average funding per pupil, within the delegated school budgets made available for mainstream primary schools and Irish-medium primary schools in the 2008/09 financial year under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) Common Funding Formula arrangements.

Information in relation to Irish-medium Units, attached to English-medium host schools has not been provided as it is not possible to disaggregate all funds for pupils within Units from the overall budget delegated to the host school.

	Average Funding per pupil
Mainstream Primary Schools	£2,641
Irish-medium Primary Schools	£3,029

The figures exclude resources held centrally by Funding Authorities and distributed to school budgets other than via the LMS formula, and other funds and support services provided to all schools - such as home to school transport and school meals - which are not allocated at individual school level.

Post-Primary Education

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposals for post primary education in the North Antrim and East Antrim constituencies. (AQW 4848/09)

The Minister of Education: Agus iad ag gníomhú thar ceann na nIontaobhaithe, d'fhoilsigh Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil moladh forbartha le St Aloysius' High School, St Comgall's High School agus St MacNissi's College a chónascadh.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools acting on the behalf of the Trustees published a development proposal to amalgamate St Aloysius' High School, St Comgall's High School and St MacNissi's College. My department is currently assessing the proposal in light of all the information available, including work on an economic appraisal, so that I may make a decision on the proposal shortly.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many meetings she has held with each of the three MEPs since devolution. (AQW 4860/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhuaill mé le Bairbre de Brún ar chúpla ócáid.

I have met with Bairbre de Brún on a few occasions.

School Maintenance

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how much money has been spent on school maintenance in each Education and Library Board, each month for the last three years. (AQW 4891/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sonraí tugtha ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne óna dtaifid chuntasaíochta de chaiteachas míosúil ar chothabháil scoile, an caiteachas a tugadh do bhuiséad na scoile san áireamh, i scoileanna rialaithe agus i scoileanna faoi chothabháil don tréimhse 2005/06 go dtí 2007/08. Tá achoimre orthu sa tábla thíos.

The Education and Library Boards have provided details from their accounting records of monthly school maintenance expenditure, including schools' delegated budget spend, in controlled and maintained schools for the period 2005/06 to 2007/08. These are summarised in the table below.

MONTHLY SCHOOL MAINTENANCE EXPENDITURE (£000S)

		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
2005/06	April	98	394	500	60	276
	May	285	287	-73	175	278
	June	511	898	413	342	401
	July	296	236	335	69	202
	August	244	132	236	150	136
	September	362	305	370	268	457
	October	437	245	455	318	306
	November	317	170	402	549	370
	December	313	176	358	164	552
	January	275	196	489	216	242
	February	248	137	377	71	600
	March	824	575	1,746	754	2,199
2006/07	April	57	170	-28	281	192
	May	260	165	356	304	268
	June	353	849	611	259	395
	July	276	138	214	37	186
	August	219	220	440	37	206
	September	352	395	515	218	484
	October	470	422	504	282	413
	November	345	345	501	228	379
	December	259	333	552	248	409
	January	262	164	342	202	367
	February	402	416	558	183	404
	March	491	767	1,603	1,031	2,542
2007/08	April	51	175	141	79	436
	May	205	276	360	430	414
	June	395	827	579	222	567
	July	413	284	534	172	711
	August	200	294	592	225	690
	September	167	431	526	269	958
	October	368	574	893	639	959
	November	331	746	1,012	262	908
	December	283	322	652	419	625
	January	315	274	882	481	522
	February	458	422	887	648	872
	March	1,774	1,377	2,202	1,546	2,271

1. The total for each year reflects accrued (not cash) expenditure i.e. the cost of the service provided in the year. However, the recording of monthly expenditure varies from Board to Board. Several show monthly accrued expenditure while the others only undertake accrual adjustments at the beginning and end of the year.
2. The two minus amounts in the table are because the estimated accruals in each case were actually greater than the cash payments.

CCEA Transfer Test

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how much has the development of the CCEA transfer test cost. (AQW 4892/09)

The Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé roimhe seo ar AQW 4248/09 a foilsíodh sa tuairisc oifigiúil ar 13 Feabhra 2009.

I refer the member to my previous answer to AQW 4248/09 published in the official report on 13 February 2009.

Pupils Suspended or Expelled

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many pupils from (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools have been (a) suspended; and (b) expelled for bullying, in each of the last five years, broken down by month, and Education and Library Board area. (AQW 4948/09)

The Minister of Education: Bailíonn an Roinn staitisticí ar fhionraíocht agus ar dhíbirt ar bhonn bliantúil ó gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne. Ní féidir an t-eolas seo a sholáthar ar bhonn míosúil. Léiríonn an tábla thíos líon na ndaltaí a cuireadh ar fionraí mar gheall ar an tromaíocht i ngach bliain le cúig bliana anuas.

The Department collects statistics on suspensions and expulsions on an annual basis from each of the Education and Library Boards. It is not possible to provide this information by month. The table below shows the number of pupils suspended for bullying in each of the last five years:

	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Primary	Post Primary	Primary	Post Primary	Primary	Post Primary	Primary	Post Primary	Primary	Post Primary
BELB	7	53	*	47	8	57	8	33	6	49
WELB	*	47	*	63	*	48	*	41	*	57
NEELB	12	56	*	61	#	54	*	84	*	75
SEELB	0	36	*	47	5	40	*	36	*	40
SELB	*	53	*	53	*	88	*	75	*	65
Total	25	245	14	271	22	287	17	269	14	286

Notes:

1. The figures relate to pupils in Key Stages 1-4 in primary and post-primary schools.
2. The figures show the number of pupils who were suspended at least once for bullying of a pupil. The number of individual suspensions for bullying of a pupil is likely to be higher since a pupil can be suspended more than once for the same reason.
3. * denotes figures less than 5.
4. # denotes figures <5 which have been treated to prevent disclosure of other small numbers.

The number of expulsions for bullying of a pupil, over the last five years, cannot be provided by Education and Library Board area as the numbers involved are small. The table below shows the number of pupil expulsions from secondary schools, for bullying of a pupil, over the last five years. There were no bullying related expulsions of pupils in primary schools.

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Number of expulsions for bullying	0	2	3	1	2
Total number of expulsions	71	63	54	45	25

Bangor Grammar School: Newbuild

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail plans for any newbuild for Bangor Grammar school.

(AQW 4963/09)

The Minister of Education: D'fhaomh an Roinn soláthar fhoirgneamh nua scoile do Bangor Grammar School agus tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh an scoil lonnaithe ag suíomh nua i gClann Mhuiris.

The department has approved the provision of a new school building for Bangor Grammar School which is planned to be located at a new site at Clanmorris.

Phasing of the project is at an advanced stage. Subject to the completion of the planning stages and resolution of site issues for the school it is estimated that construction could start in Autumn this year.

Priory Integrated College

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2514/09, to detail the impact of her decision to limit to 400 the enrolment numbers at the proposed Priory Integrated College, on cooperation between that college and Sullivan Upper.

(AQW 4972/09)

The Minister of Education: Socraíodh líon iontrála Priory College le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt ag féachaint do na treochtaí déimeagrafacha. Laistigh de na líonta rollaithe atá leagtha síos, is ceist í a bhaineann leis na scoileanna féin, ag obair i dteannta le Coláistí Breisoideachais agus le soláthraithe eile, le socrú a dhéanamh ar an dóigh is fearr le cur lena réimse curaclaim de réir riachtanas an Chreata Teidlíochta agus ar mhaithe le riachtanais agus mianaidhmeanna na ndaltaí.

The enrolment number for Priory College has been determined to take account of demographic trends and was agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Within the enrolment numbers set, it is a matter for schools themselves, working together and with Further Education Colleges and other providers to decide how best to expand their curricular offer in line with the requirements of the Entitlement Framework and in the interests of their pupils' needs and aspirations.

Priory Integrated College

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2514/09, to detail the impact on the sixth form provision, of her decision to limit to 400 the enrolment numbers in the proposed Priory Integrated College.

(AQW 4973/09)

The Minister of Education: Iarraim ar an Chomhalta amharc ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar a cheist roimhe seo AQW 4145/09, a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 30 Eanáir 2009.

I would refer the member to my answer to his previous question AQW 4145/09 published in the Official Report on 30 January 2009.

School Meals

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what percentage of pupils in each post-primary school avail of free school meals, broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(AQW 4987/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF PUPILS IN POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS ENTITLED TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS BY CONSTITUENCY – 2008/09

BELFAST EAST

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Ashfield Girls' High School	18
Ashfield Boys' High School	20

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Orangefield High School	46
Grosvenor Gs	3
Bloomfield Collegiate	3
Campbell College	1
Strathearn School	2
Knockbreda High School	30
Our Lady And St Patrick's College	1

BELFAST NORTH

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Belfast Model School For Girls	36
Belfast Boys' Model School	38
Castle High School	45
St Patrick's College, Bearnagheeha	39
Little Flower Girls' School	27
Our Lady Of Mercy Girls' School	40
St Gemma's High School	61
Hazelwood College	34
Belfast Royal Academy	5
St Malachy's College, Belfast	9
Dominican College	8
Newtownabbey Community High School	42

BELFAST SOUTH

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
St Joseph's College, Belfast	31
Malone Integrated College	33
Wellington College	6
Methodist College	1
The Royal Belfast Academical Inst.	2
Rathmore Gs	3
Victoria College	4
Hunterhouse College	5
Aquinas Diocesan Gs	2
Newtownbreda High School	22

BELFAST WEST

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
St Louise's College	36
St Rose's High School	54

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Christian Brothers Secondary School	45
St Genevieve's High School	33
La Salle Boys' School	31
Corpus Christi College	42
Colaiste Feirste	35
St Mary's Christian Brothers' Gs	19
St Dominic's High School	15
St Colm's High School, Dunmurry	57

EAST ANTRIM

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Larne High School	20
Carrickfergus College	15
Monkstown Community School	22
Downshire School	15
St Comgall's High School	22
Ulidia Intergrated College	11
Carrickfergus Gs	3
Larne Gs	5
Belfast High School	2
St Macnissi's College, Carnlough	7

EAST DERRY

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Limavady High School	20
St Mary's Limavady	27
St Patrick's High School, Dungiven	29
Limavady Gs	6
Garvagh High School	23
Coleraine Secondary School	35
St Joseph's High School, Coleraine	25
St Paul's College, Kilrea	19
North Coast Integrated College	24
Coleraine High School	4
Coleraine Academical Institution	3
Loreto College	4
Dominican College	8

FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Lisnaskea High School	16
Devenish College	13
St Mary's High School, Belleek	24
St Fanchea's College	21
St Joseph's College, Enniskillen	23
St Mary's College, Irvinestown	35
St Aidan's High School	5
St Eugene's College	18
St Comhghall's High	30
Erne Integrated College	19
Enniskillen Collegiate	3
Mount Lourdes Gs	8
Portora Royal School	4
St Michael's College, Enniskillen	8
Fivemiletown High School	11
Aughnacloy College	15
Drumglass High School	13
St Ciaran's High School	15
St Patrick's College, Dungannon	23
Integrated College Dungannon	25
The Royal School Dungannon	4
St Patrick's Academy	12

FOYLE

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Lisneal College	25
St Mary's College, Derry	51
St Patricks & St Brigids High School	24
St Joseph's Secondary, Derry	46
St Peter's High School	63
St Cecilia's College	41
St Brigid's College, Derry	61
Immaculate Conception College	46
Oakgrove Integrated College	30
Thornhill College	17
St Columb's College	18
Foyle & Londonderry College	6
Lumen Christi College	6

LAGAN VALLEY

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Lisnagarvey High School	40
Dunmurry High School	39
Laurelhill Community College	13
St Patrick's High School, Lisburn	21
Fort Hill College	13
Friends' School	1
Wallace High School	2
Dromore High School	8

MID ULSTER

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Magherafelt High School	14
Maghera High School	37
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	14
St Mary's College, Clady	18
St Pius X College	20
St Patrick's Co-Ed Comp College	12
Sperrin Integrated College	16
Rainey Endowed School	3
St Mary's Gs, Magherafelt	5
Cookstown High School	11
St Joseph's High School, Coalisland	44
Holy Trinity College	28
St Joseph's Convent Gs	12

NEWRY AND ARMAGH

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Newtownhamilton High School	8
Markethill High School	6
City Armagh High School	18
Tandragee Junior High School	14
Newry High School	19
St Joseph's Boys' High School, Newry	40
St Mary's High School, Newry	34
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	26
St Brigid's High School, Armagh	34
St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen	39
St Patrick's High School, Keady	15

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
St Catherine's College	17
Armagh Integrated College	31
Abbey Christian Brothers Gs	9
Our Lady's Gs	8
St COLman's College, Newry	5
The Royal School Armagh	2
St Patrick's Gs, Armagh	10

NORTH ANTRIM

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Ballycastle High School	20
Ballymoney High School	25
Cullybackey High School	14
Dunclug College	17
Dunluce School	19
Ballee Community High School	34
St Aloysius High School	38
Our Lady Of Lourdes High School	28
St Patrick's College	21
Cross And Passion College	16
Slemish College	12
Cambridge House Grammar School	4
St Louis Gs	4
Ballymena Academy	2
Dalriada School	3

SOUTH ANTRIM

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Ballyclare Secondary School	8
Glengormley High School	20
Parkhall High School	17
Edmund Rice College	34
St Benedict's College	23
Crumlin Integrated College	9
Ballyclare High School	3
Antrim Gs	2

SOUTH DOWN

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Blackwater Integrated College	20

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
The High School Ballynahinch	10
St Mary's High School, Downpatrick	22
St Colmcille's High School, Crossgar	14
St Colman's High School, Ballynahinch	28
St Malachy's High School	24
De La Salle Secondary School	28
Shimna Integrated College	13
Down High School	2
Assumption Gs	5
St Patrick's Gs, Downpatrick	6
Kilkeel High School	7
Rathfriland High School	13
St Columban's College	27
St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint	23
St LouiS Gs	12
Sacred Heart Gs	7

STRANGFORD

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Movilla High School	25
Comber High School	23
Glastry College	11
Saintfield High School	6
Dundonald High School	32
St Columba's High School	19
Lagan College	12
Strangford Integrated College	9
Regent House School	2

UPPER BANN

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Clounagh Junior High School	14
Banbridge High School	18
Killicomaine Junior High School	10
Lurgan Junior High School	13
Craigavon Senior High School	17
St Mary's High School, Lurgan	19
St Patrick's College, Banbridge	24
St Paul's Junior High School	23

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Lismore Comprehensive School	26
Drumcree College	44
Brownlow Int College	34
New-Bridge Integrated College	10
Banbridge Academy	2
Lurgan College	3
Portadown College	3
St Michael's Grammar, Lurgan	9

WEST TYRONE

School Name	% Of Pupils Entitled To Free School Meals
Castleberg High School	20
Omagh High School	15
Strabane High School	31
St Eugene's High School, Castleberg	47
Dean Brian Maguire College	23
St John's High School	36
Sacred Heart College	30
Holy Cross College	34
Drumragh College	26
Omagh Academy	4
Strabane Gs	10
Christian Brothers' Gs	10
Loreto Gs	10

Source: Annual school census.

Teachers in Full-Time Permanent Posts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have been in full time permanent posts in primary and post-primary schools, broken down by (i) Education and Library Boards; (ii) Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; (iii) Integrated Sector; and (iv) Irish Medium Sector. (AQW 4993/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos:

The information requested is detailed in the table below:

	Primary	Post Primary	Total
Belfast Education & Library Board	428	351	779
Western Education & Library Board	376	388	764
North Eastern Education & Library Board	948	944	1892
South Eastern Education & Library Board	819	655	1474
Southern Education & Library Board	623	706	1329
Catholic Council for Maintained Schools	3432	2729	6161

	Primary	Post Primary	Total
Grant-Maintained Integrated	231	638	869
Irish Medium	128	40	168
Total	6985	6451	13436

Bangor Grammar School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education when the capital works project for Bangor Grammar School will begin. (AQW 5007/09)

The Minister of Education: D'fhaomh an Roinn soláthar fhoirgneamh nua scoile do Bangor Grammar School agus tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh an scoil lonnaithe ag suíomh nua i gClann Mhuiris.

The department has approved the provision of a new school building for Bangor Grammar School which is planned to be located at a new site at Clanmorris. Planning of the project is at an advanced stage. Subject to the completion of the planning stages and resolution of site issues for the school it is estimated that construction could start in the Autumn this year and be completed approximately two years later.

Bangor Grammar School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education when the capital works project for Bangor Grammar School is due to be completed. (AQW 5009/09)

The Minister of Education: D'fhaomh an Roinn soláthar fhoirgneamh nua scoile do Bangor Grammar School agus tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh an scoil lonnaithe ag suíomh nua i gClann Mhuiris.

The department has approved the provision of a new school building for Bangor Grammar School which is planned to be located at a new site at Clanmorris. Planning of the project is at an advanced stage. Subject to the completion of the planning stages and resolution of site issues for the school it is estimated that construction could start in the Autumn this year and be completed approximately two years later.

Glenravel Primary School

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education when additional temporary accommodation for (i) office; (ii) staffroom; and (iii) resource facilities at Glenravel Primary School will be provided. (AQW 5029/09)

The Minister of Education: Aontaíonn an Roinn go bhfuil gá le cóiríocht shealadach breise ann ag an scoil le heasnamh oifige, sheomra foirne agus áiseanna acmhainní a réiteach.

The Department has agreed that there is a need for additional temporary accommodation at the school to address a shortfall in office, staffroom and resource facilities. The scheme is currently at tender stage and it will be progressed early in the 2009/10 financial year and should be completed later that year.

Educational Psychologists

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education what is the average waiting time for children in the Belfast Education and Library Board area, to be assessed by Educational Psychologists. (AQW 5067/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas is déanaí atá le fáil ó Phríomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste:-

The latest information available from the Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board is as follows:-

- Non-statutory assessments – 43 days
- Statutory assessments – 39 days

Both figures are in respect of the 2007/2008 academic year.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of employees in her Department that have disabilities. (AQW 5070/09)

The Minister of Education: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all NICS Departments.

Mar sin de, beidh an tAire Airgeadais agus Pearsanra ag tabhairt freagra ar son na Ranna ar fad.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Primary School Teacher Graduates

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to address the imbalance of primary school teacher graduates with the number of permanent posts available. (AQW 5090/09)

The Minister of Education: Aithníonn mo Roinn an éifeacht atá agus a bheidh ag déimeagrafaíocht ar líon na múinteoirí atá de dhíth orainn.

My Department recognises the impact which demography is having, and will have, on the number of teachers that we need here. The approved intake numbers to the initial teacher education institutions have been reduced over the past five years and we will, as part of the annual initial teacher education approval process, be carefully considering the number of teachers needed in future years.

The Department has repeatedly advised 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.

The rules of the Teachers' Pension Scheme militate against the employment of retired teachers, in that such teachers may suffer a reduction in pension as a result of earnings from employment as a teacher. The Department has strict controls in place to monitor such cases.

Since 1999/2000 the level of central reimbursement by education and library boards of the cost of substitute cover has been capped at point 4 of the Main Scale. This provides an incentive for schools to employ newly qualified teachers to provide substitute cover in preference to costlier retired teachers. However, schools have the flexibility to decide to engage a teacher at a higher cost at a charge to the school budget if they so desire.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Education what the cost was of redundancies which resulted from re-organisation under the Review of Public Administration, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5091/09)

The Minister of Education: No redundancies have been made in connection with the RPA in education.

The Outline Business Case for the RPA has identified savings of £20m per annum by year 3 of ESA. This will be achieved through a reduction of 463 posts with associated severance costs of around £43 million.

New structures are currently being developed for ESA, including new models of service delivery at regional and local level, taking into account the business needs of the organisation. This process will identify the numbers and skills of staff required in each function and area. Until this process has been completed, it is not possible to provide a breakdown of the potential impact of change by Education and Library Board area.

De réir beartais an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin, déanfar gach iarracht is féidir le hiomarcaíochtaí a sheachaint agus ní bhreithneofar iomarcaíocht éigeantach ach amháin nuair a breithníodh gach rogha phraiticiúil eile.

In line with Executive policy, every possible effort will be made to avoid redundancies and compulsory redundancy will only receive consideration when all other practical options have been exhausted.

Rural Primary Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education (i) how many rural primary schools there are; and (ii) how many rural primary schools have an enrolment of less than 105 pupils, broken down by sector. (AQW 5108/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS BY SIZE AND MANAGEMENT TYPE – 2008/09

Management type	Enrolment less than 105	Enrolment 105 or more	Total
Controlled	130	210	340
Voluntary	1	5	6
C Maintained	153	188	341
Other Maintained	11	4	15
Controlled Integrated	5	8	13
GMI	4	16	20
Total	304	431	735

Source: school census in the north of Ireland.

Note:

1. Figures based on total enrolment.
2. For the purpose of this exercise, 'Urban' schools are defined as those located in Belfast and Derry District Council areas only. Schools in all other district councils are therefore defined as 'Rural'.
3. Counts include Preparatory Departments of grammar schools.

Urban Primary Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education (i) how many urban primary schools there are; and (ii) how many urban primary schools have an enrolment of less than 140 pupils, broken down by sector. (AQW 5109/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

URBAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS BY SIZE AND MANAGEMENT TYPE – 2008/09

Management type	Enrolment less than 140	Enrolment 140 or more	Total
Controlled	19	36	55
Voluntary	3	5	8
C Maintained	5	56	61
Other Maintained	6	3	9
Controlled Integrated	1	1	2
GMI	0	3	3
Total	34	104	138

Source: school census in the north of Ireland.

Note:

1. Figures based on total enrolment.
2. For the purpose of this exercise, 'Urban' schools are defined as those located in Belfast and Derry District Council areas only. Schools in all other district councils are therefore defined as 'Rural'.
3. Counts include Preparatory Departments of grammar schools.

Post-Primary Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education (i) how many post-primary schools there are; and (ii) how many post-primary schools have an enrolment of less than 500 pupils, broken down by (i) sector; and (ii) grammar and secondary. (AQW 5110/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH ENROLMENTS OF LESS THAN/EQUAL TO OR MORE THAN 500 PUPILS BY SCHOOL TYPE AND MANAGEMENT TYPE – 2008/09

Management type	Secondary		Grammar		Total
	Enrolment less than 500	Enrolment 500 or more	Enrolment less than 500	Enrolment 500 or more	
Controlled	29	32	3	14	78
Voluntary - Other managed	0	0	1	21	22
Voluntary -Catholic managed	0	0	1	29	30
Catholic Maintained	37	35	0	0	72
Other Maintained	0	1	0	0	1
Controlled Integrated	3	1	0	0	4
Grant Maintained Integrated	6	10	0	0	16
Total	75	79	5	64	223

Source: school census in the north of Ireland.

Note:

1. Figures relate to total enrolment of schools.

Southern Education and Library Board: Educational Psychologists

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children in schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area are on a waiting list to see an educational psychologist; and (ii) what is the average waiting time. (AQW 5183/09)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) that the Board's Educational Psychology Service uses a time allocation model of service delivery under which schools prioritise their needs for the year, during September, together with their named educational psychologist (EP). As such, schools hold their own waiting lists and submit completed referral forms as appropriate throughout the year. Agreed referrals may be sent to the EPs a few days or weeks prior to assessment. As a consequence this data is not held centrally by the Board.

Ní féidir a shonrú, mar sin de, líon na bpáistí atá ag fanacht ar choinne le Síceolaí Oideachais i ngach scoil i limistéar an SELB agus ní féidir a shonrú an mheánthréimhse feithimh dá réir sin.

It is not, therefore, possible to state how many children are waiting to see an EP in each school in the SELB area or consequently an average waiting time.

Southern Education and Library Board: Composite Classes

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children in the Southern Education and Library Board area are in composite classes in primary schools; and (ii) what variation has there been in this figure, over the last five years. (AQW 5184/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

PRIMARY PUPILS IN COMPOSITE CLASSES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD – 2003/04 – 2007/08

Year	Year 1 – 7 pupils in composite classes	% of total year 1 – 7 enrolment
2003/04	11,353	31
2004/05	11,115	30
2005/06	11,087	30
2006/07	10,726	29
2007/08	10,539	29

Source: Annual school census.

Note: Figures relate to pupils in year 1 – 7 in primary schools and grammar school preparatory departments.

Southern Education and Library Board: Entrance Examinations

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education which grammar schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area have indicated their intention to set their own entrance examinations in 2010. (AQW 5185/09)

The Minister of Education: While I am aware through media reports that a number of schools have announced their intention to operate outside the mainstream post-primary transfer system, no grammar school in the Southern Education and Library Board area has formally confirmed to me that they intend setting entrance examinations.

Tá treoir eisithe agam ar Aistriú 2010 a mholann úsáid critéar iontrála neamh-acadúil agus tá súil agam go gcloíonn gach scoil leis na moltaí mar mhaithe le córas a chruthú atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chomhionannas agus ar shármhaitheas.

I have issued guidance on Transfer 2010 recommending the use of non-academic admissions criteria and hope that all schools will adhere to these recommendations in the interests of creating a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

Languages in Primary Schools

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education why Spanish, Irish and Polish, as opposed to French, German or Chinese (Mandarin) is offered in primary schools. (AQW 5187/09)

The Minister of Education: I believe in the importance of language learning for our young people and am focusing on Spanish and Irish for very good reasons. Spanish is the second most widely spoken global language after English, and an increasingly important one economically. Irish is the native language of Ireland; it is flourishing across Ireland and is a key part of our cultural heritage.

Similarly, in an increasingly diverse and multi-cultural society, our young people are already learning and playing with newcomer children from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Polish has the largest number of school pupils across the newcomer languages, and is therefore being included in the programme.

I should also clarify that it is a matter for primary schools to decide whether they wish to participate in the programme, and it is for each primary school to decide on the language provision they offer to their pupils.

Tá mé sásta leis an aiseolas dhearfach a fuarthas go dtí seo ó na scoileanna sin atá páirteach sa chlár teangacha bunscoile agus tá mé ag súil leis go mbainfidh níos mó daoine óga tairbhe as dara teanga a fhoghlaim ó aois óg.

I am pleased with the positive feedback received to date from those schools choosing to participate in the primary languages programme and look forward to more of our young people benefitting from learning a second language from an early age.

Creative Youth Partnerships

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the work of Creative Youth Partnerships; and whether her Department will consider ring-fencing their budget. (AQW 5198/09)

The Minister of Education: Leagann mo Roinn béim mhór ar chumas daoine óga a fhorbairt ó thaobh cruthaitheachta agus inniúlachta de.

My Department places great importance on developing young people's capacity for creativity and innovation. Creative Youth Partnerships has been operating as a pilot since 2004/05 and, at my Department's request, has recently produced proposals for a mainstreaming strategy for the years beyond 2008/09.

My Department, together with the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, is currently considering those proposals, including information from Creative Youth Partnerships on the extent and impact of the activities undertaken during the pilot phase. Decisions on the proposals will be taken when this consideration is completed but a key challenge in any future arrangements will be to ensure that creativity and innovation is mainstreamed as a natural part of the planning and delivery of the revised curriculum.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Educational Psychologists

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) how many school children in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area are on a waiting list to see an educational psychologist; and (ii) what is the average waiting time. (AQW 5202/09)

The Minister of Education: Is é an figiúr is déanaí atá ar fáil ó Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt (NEELB) maidir le líon na bpáistí ar atreoraíodh chuig an Bhord iad agus atá ag fanacht ar mheasúnú riachtanas speisialta ná 593 i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2008.

The latest figure available from the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) regarding the number of children who have been referred to the Board and who are currently awaiting special needs assessment is as at October 2008 and is 593.

This figure is 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, pre-school and examination arrangements.

The latest figure available from the NEELB regarding the average waiting time for pupils to be assessed by an educational psychologist, again as at October 2008, is as follows:-

Non-statutory assessments – 108 days

Statutory assessments – less than 6 weeks.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Entrance Examinations

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education which grammar schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area have indicated their intention to set their own entrance examinations in 2010. (AQW 5204/09)

The Minister of Education: While I am aware through media reports that a number of schools have announced their intention to operate outside the mainstream post-primary transfer system, no grammar school in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area has formally confirmed to me that they intend setting entrance examinations.

Tá treoir eisithe agam ar Aistriú 2010 a mholann úsáid critéar iontrála neamh-acadúil agus tá súil agam go gcloíonn gach scoil leis na moltaí mar mhaithe le córas a chruthú atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chomhionannas agus ar shármhaitheas.

I have issued guidance on Transfer 2010 recommending the use of non-academic admissions criteria and hope that all schools will adhere to these recommendations in the interests of creating a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

Transfer 2010

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education if she will make public the full legal advice she received from the Departmental Solicitor's Office about the guidelines she announced in the Assembly on 2 February 2009.

(AQW 5227/09)

The Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé roimhe seo ar AQW 4694/09 a foilsíodh sa tuairisc oifigiúil ar 13 Feabhra 2009.

I refer the member to my previous answer to AQW 4694/09 published in the official report on 13 February 2009.

Academic Selection

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education whether her new guidance for schools obliges those schools operating the Dickson Plan to refrain from using academic criteria for transfer. (AQW 5234/09)

The Minister of Education: Dhíreoinn aird an chomhalta ar na freagraí a thug mé roimhe seo ar AQW 2259/09 agus ar AQW 2260/09 a foilsíodh sa tuairisc oifigiúil ar 24 Samhain 2008.

I refer the member to my previous answers to AQW 2259/09 and AQW 2260/09 published in the official report on 24 November 2008.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education whether her new guidance for schools relating to post-primary transfer takes account of the provisions of the St Andrews Agreement Act and its explanatory notes which negate a ban on academic selection. (AQW 5239/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an treoir a foilsíodh de bhun an ráitis a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 cur síos fíorasach ar an chomhthéacs dleathach ina mbeidh iontrálacha iarbhunscoile á bhfeidhmiú d'Aistriú 2010.

The guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly provides a factual description of the legal context within which post-primary admissions will operate for Transfer 2010. I have asked all post-primary schools to consider the guidance carefully and adhere to its recommendations. If that request is listened to and acted upon Transfer 2010 will become one of the key building blocks of reform resulting in a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence that treats all of our children equally.

Academic Selection

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4398/09, to outline the impact on her programme of reform resulting from the failure to ban academic selection. (AQW 5242/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa ráiteas faoi Aistriú 2010 a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009, d'iarr mé ar gach iarbhunscoil machnamh cúramach a dhéanamh ar an treoir a d'eisigh mo Roinn ar Aistriú 2010 agus d'iarr mé orthu cloí leis na moltaí atá inti.

In my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly on Transfer 2010 I asked that all post-primary schools consider my Department's Transfer 2010 guidance carefully and adhere to its recommendations. If that request is listened to and acted upon Transfer 2010 will become one of the key building blocks of reform resulting in a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence that treats all of our children equally.

Male Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the answers to AQW4130/09 and AQW 4432/09, what is the reason for the discrepancy in the figures for the numbers of male teachers in the 2007-2008 academic year. (AQW 5290/09)

The Minister of Education: The apparent discrepancy is because the question asked in AQW 4432/09 requested information only on full-time permanent teachers, and the breakdown requested did not include the voluntary sector.

The answer to AQW 4130/09 gave 1,337 as the total number of male teachers in primary schools in 2007-2008. This figure included part-time teachers, temporary teachers filling vacancies and teachers employed on a daily (1/365th) basis, as well as full-time permanent teachers. It also included teachers working in the preparatory departments of voluntary grammar schools.

Sa fhreagra ar AQ 4432/09 tugadh 1,221 mar líon na múinteoirí lánaimseartha fear i mbunscoileanna (gan múinteoirí atá ag obair i ranna ullmhúcháin scoileanna gramadaí deonacha san áireamh) sa scoilbhliain 2007-2008. Níor cuireadh san áireamh múinteoirí páirtaimseartha, múinteoirí sealadacha a bhí ag líonadh folúntas ná múinteoirí a bhí fostaithe ar bhonn laethúil (1 as 365).

The answer to AQW 4432/09 gave 1,221 as the number of full-time permanent male teachers in primary schools (excluding teachers working in preparatory departments of voluntary grammar schools) in 2007-2008. It also excluded part-time teachers, temporary teachers filling vacancies and teachers employed on a daily (1/365th) basis.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education the date on which the last children will sit academic tests as part of the post primary transfer process. (AQO 2051/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuil deireadh leis na teisteanna aistrithe. Rinneadh an 11+ deiridh ar 21 Samhain 2008. Tá treoir eisithe agam ar Aistriú 2010 a chuimsíonn moltaí do chritéir iontrála neamhroghnacha agus iarraim tuairimí mar chuid de chomhairliúchán a bheidh á réachtáil go dtí 27 Aibreán 2009.

The final transfer tests have thankfully ended. The last 11+ test was sat on 21 November 2008. I have issued guidance for Transfer 2010 which includes recommendations for non-selective admissions criteria upon which views are invited as part of a consultation exercise running until 27 April 2009.

There will be no Department of Education test in place to facilitate the use of academic admissions criteria in future post-primary transfer processes. The guidance recommends that schools do not use academic admissions criteria. If a school chooses to do so, it will have to provide for itself the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that such criteria require.

Transfer 2010 represents an opportunity to spare all children the ordeal of sitting academic tests to gain admission to post-primary school, and provides grammar schools with the opportunity to make their excellent provision available in a fairer manner.

Sustainable Schools Strategy

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education what are the policy objectives of her Sustainable Schools strategy. (AQO 2055/09)

The Minister of Education: Is cuspóir í den Bheartas um Scoileanna Inbhuanaithe ná go mbeidh scoileanna láidir inmharthana ann a sholáthraíonn oideachas den chéad scoth do na páistí ar mhaithe a leasa féin agus ar mhaithe leasa an tsochaí.

The objective of the Sustainable Schools Policy is to have strong viable schools providing our children with a high quality education for their own and society's benefit. School sustainability must first and foremost be about the quality of the educational experience for our children. The Policy sets out six criteria to be considered in assessing a school's viability:-

- Quality Educational Experience
- Stable Enrolment Trends
- Sound Financial Position
- Strong Leadership and Management
- Accessibility
- Strong Links with the Community.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the advice she received from the Departmental Solicitor on the introduction of guidance relating to post primary transfer. (AQO 2057/09)

The Minister of Education: Fuair mo Roinn comhairle chuimsitheach dlí ar an treoir a eisíodh ar 2 Feabhra 2009. Faigheann gach Roinn comhairle dlí (agus cineálacha eile comhairle atá riachtanach) ar roinnt mórbeart eile.

My Department took comprehensive legal advice on the guidance it issued on 2 February 2009. All Departments take legal (and other necessary types of advice) on many major actions.

Like all legal advice obtained by Government Departments, this advice is privileged. The legislative basis for the issuing of guidance has already been published. Paragraph 1 of the guidance states that it is issued under Article 30 of the Education Order 2006. This Article states: "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".

Post-Primary Transfer

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education what advice has been given to primary schools in relation to preparing pupils for transfer to post primary schools in 2010. (AQO 2058/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an Treoir a foilsíodh ar 2 Feabhra 2009 tacaíocht do bhunscoileanna agus í ag iarraidh a chinntiú nach ndéanfaidh roinnt scoileanna ghradaí iarracht soláthar an churaclaim bunscoile a shaobhadh.

The guidance published on 2 February 2009 supports primary schools in seeking to ensure that some grammar schools do not attempt to distort the delivery of the primary curriculum.

The guidance contains the following advice - "In relation to the issue of preparation for a post-primary school's entrance test, primary schools should note that this cannot be required of them and that the Department strongly recommends against it. Indeed, all primary schools are covered by statutory obligations to deliver the primary curriculum as defined in Articles 4-9 of the Education Order 2006. The Education and Training Inspectorate will also continue to monitor the quality of teaching and learning in the context of the revised curriculum in primary schools."

Teaching Civics and Citizenship

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Education what provisions exist for teaching civics and citizenship in the classroom. (AQO 2059/09)

The Minister of Education: Is mar chuid den churacalm athbhreithnithe reachtúil ó Bhliain 1 go Bliain 12 í an tSaoránacht.

Citizenship is part of the statutory revised curriculum from Year 1 to Year 12. At primary level this is covered through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, and at post-primary level through Learning for Life and Work. Before this was introduced, my Department invested in a substantial programme of piloting and teacher training for post-primary schools, recognising the important role citizenship education can play in developing our young people as contributors to society, and the need for teacher support to deliver citizenship in the classroom.

My Department continues to provide resources to the Education and Library Boards for citizenship officers, and further training and support materials have been provided for both primary and post-primary teachers as the revised curriculum is implemented. In addition, my Department provides all Year 11 pupils with a Young Citizens Passport booklet, providing information on a range of relevant areas as a reference point for them.

A recent evaluation by the University of Ulster, covering the period 2003- 2007, found that citizenship education has had significant and positive impacts on pupils' knowledge and understanding in this area, and on their confidence, attitudes and behaviours. Teachers also found the training programme positive, and that citizenship had a positive impact on curriculum planning, classroom practice and the outcomes of active learning for all pupils.

Irish Language in Post-Primary Schools

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to encourage post-primary schools to include the Irish language in the curriculum. (AQO 2060/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa domhan an lae inniu, is rud tábhachtach í foghlaim teanga do dhaoine óga ó thaobh cúrsaí eacnamaíochta de, go sóisialta agus ar bhonn cultúrtha.

In today's world language learning is important for our young people economically, socially and culturally. At post-primary level languages are part of the statutory revised curriculum at Key Stage 3 for all pupils, and schools must offer pupils access to language courses at Key Stage 4. Under the revised curriculum schools also have greater flexibility in the languages they offer. This can be any official language of the EU member states, which includes Irish, and any other additional languages.

My Department supports and encourages the delivery of all languages in schools and, to address a gap, has provided support for Irish resources in post-primary schools to ensure schools are able to deliver the subject of Irish language. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is providing more resources for teachers in the Irish Medium sector.

I also believe that learning a language from an early age means that young people can develop a lifelong enjoyment of languages. The programme I introduced for primary schools last year will allow young people to learn Irish (native language), among other languages, from an early stage in primary school, which they can then build on at post-primary school.

I will shortly be receiving recommendations on a language Strategy from the Universities' Joint Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies.

Post-Primary Transfer

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the equality implications of her statement on 2010 post-primary transfer. (AQO 2061/09)

The Minister of Education: My whole approach to transfer has been shaped by the inequities of the current system and by my desire to create a system that can deliver equality and social justice.

The guidance I announced on 2 February 2009, if followed by all post-primary schools, will create a more equal system of post-primary transfer, levelling out the inequalities of the old system.

The old system has failed children from working class communities who are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of admission to grammar schools. Whilst 1 in 4 children admitted to a non-selective school is entitled to free school meals, only 1 in 17 children admitted to grammar school falls into this category.

In recommending that geographical criteria such as parish and catchment area are used in conjunction with nearest suitable school, the guidance seeks to ensure that rural applicants are not disadvantaged. All children will be considered equally local when applying for a place at schools nearest to them in each of the categories of 'suitable school'.

Cinntoidh an treoir, má chloíonn gach iarbhunscoil léi, go mbeidh páistí ag aistriú chuig an iarbhunscoil, ar bhonn comhionannais, ar bhonn ceartais shóisialta agus ar bhonn sármhaitheasa.

The guidance, if followed by all post-primary schools, will ensure that children transfer on the basis of equality, social justice and excellence.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for recommending that a free school meal quota be used as the first criterion as part of her guidelines for post primary transfer. (AQO 2062/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá neamhionannas ann maidir le hiontrálacha mar gheall ar na socrúithe a bhí ann d'Aistriú 2009 agus do bhlianta roimhe seo, a raibh Teist Aistrithe mar chuid de.

The arrangements which have operated for Transfer 2009 and preceding years, involving a Transfer Test, have produced an inequality in admissions. In the past it has been extremely hard for a child from a low income family

to be admitted to a grammar school. If we use entitlement to free school meals (FSME) as an indicator of low income, 1 in 4 children in non-grammar post-primary schools are entitled to free school meals whereas the ratio in grammar schools is 1 in 17. This is unfair for both the child and for the non-selective schools.

In order to ensure that the admissions process no longer disadvantages children from low income families, the guidance for Transfer 2010 published on 2 February 2009 recommends that all schools use as their first criterion a measure that will ensure that FSME applicants gain admission to a post-primary school at the same rate as all other applicants. For example, if 20% of applications are from FSME applicants, then at least 20% of the school's places should be allocated to FSME applicants.

Chief Inspector of Schools

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the report produced by the Chief Inspector of Schools for the period 2006-08. (AQO 2064/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an tuarascáil chuimsitheach ón Phríomhchigire agus gabhaim buíochas leisean agus lena chomhghleacaithe as an ról tábhachtach atá acu maidir le caighdeán a ardú inár scoileanna.

I welcome this comprehensive report from the Chief Inspector and thank him and his colleagues for the important contribution they make to raising standards in our schools.

The report has shown improvements in all areas which come under the responsibility of the Department of Education and I recognise the work that those in daily contact with our children and young people have put in to achieve these improvements.

I am however concerned that there are major areas which require urgent attention to ensure our children and young people are given the best possible educational experiences at every level.

The report shows that almost one fifth of pupils do not attain standards in literacy and numeracy expected for their age by the time they leave primary school. This is worrying, and an obvious contributor to the fact that one thousand pupils leave school without any GCSE qualifications. The report also shows that in one quarter of primary and post-primary schools the leadership and management needs to improve. The strength of leadership has a direct impact on the level of standards in a school and we need to encourage and support teachers to develop as leaders.

For too long the unacceptable level of underachievement in our schools has been ignored, but I am determined that changes are needed and will be implemented.

I have a programme of progressive reforms underway, including proposals on post-primary arrangements. This report shows the need for these reforms, which will help raise standards in our schools. Every school has the potential to be a good school and our School Improvement Policy and Literacy and Numeracy Strategy will be key elements in our efforts to help children and young people raise their levels of achievement.

In addition, the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority in January 2010 will see the wholesale reform of the administration of education. ESA will deliver genuine benefits for schools and the pupils they serve while addressing equality issues in many areas. ESA will also be instrumental in supporting schools in their work to raise standards, and will challenge schools where necessary.

The number of children educated through the medium of Irish continues to grow and the Chief Inspector has noted the strengths and improvements in Irish-medium education, which makes a distinctive contribution to the educational landscape. The report also notes the sometimes poor accommodation due to lack of investment, which is far short of what should be expected. This is an area where support will need to be provided in the future.

The Chief Inspector also notes that special needs schools, where invaluable services are provided for our most vulnerable children, have demonstrated their capacity and confidence in sustaining good standards.

I will be meeting the Chief Inspector to discuss this important report and recommendations and have asked that copies are made available to all schools and those who serve on Boards of Governors. There is much to celebrate in education, but hard decisions need to be taken if improvements are to be made.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4763/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department issued the DFP guidance: DAO 12/08 in December both internally and to its Non Departmental Public Bodies and stressed the importance of processing payments as efficiently and effectively as possible. The Department's payments are processed by Account NI. Statistics provided by Account NI show that, of the 2,510 payments issued during the month of December, 86.6% were made within 10 workings days of receipt of a valid invoice. All of the Department's NDPBs are striving to comply with the prompt payment pledge as fully as possible, within the constraints of their individual commercial environments.

Young People not in Education, Employment or Training

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many young people are not currently engaged in employment, education or training broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4822/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) of the number and proportion of 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland that are not in employment, full-time education or Government supported training schemes are shown in the table below. However, estimates are not available at parliamentary constituency level, as the LFS sample size and design does not support the production of sufficiently reliable estimates of this type at constituency level.

LABOUR FORCE SURVEY ESTIMATES OF 16-24 YEAR OLDS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, WHO ARE NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, FULL-TIME EDUCATION, OR GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED TRAINING SCHEMES¹, 2006 – 2008

Period	Number	% of all aged 16-24
July-September 2006	40,000	17%
July-September 2007	38,000	16%
July-September 2008	45,000	19%

¹ Figures exclude those in part-time education or training.

Further Education: Review of

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to the Review of Further Education, whether super colleges offered redundancy to long serving lecturers as an inducement to take early retirement. (AQW 4823/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following the Further Education College mergers in August 2007, colleges had to restructure their provision and curriculum to meet revised business requirements, necessitating a number of redundancies in their staffing complements. The redundancies took place because the posts were no longer required in the revised structure.

In making redundancies, college employers have had to comply with the Contracts of Employment and Redundancy Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 1965. Colleges have confirmed that all lecturing posts declared redundant under the Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme have been suppressed.

Student Fees

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide details of any public announcements he has made about student fees including dates, and what progress has been made on them. (AQW 4952/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have made the following announcements regarding the current review of variable tuition fees; (i) on 14 November 2008 I confirmed my intention to commence the review this current academic year; (ii) on 3 December 2008 I announced Joanne Stuart as independent chairperson of the review; and (iii) on 9 December 2008 I clarified the position with regard to timescales.

In terms of progress to date, a research project is underway and a stakeholder steering group has been established. I am committed to updating the Committee on a quarterly basis and as key milestones are reached.

I anticipate receiving an interim report for consideration in May 2009 which I will bring before the Committee for Employment and Learning prior to public consultation and impact assessments scheduled for Autumn 2009.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the Northern Ireland Tourist Board plans to develop and promote the River Foyle for tourism. (AQW 4711/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): The development and promotion of an asset such as the River Foyle is captured at a strategic level within the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) draft Corporate Plan (2008-2011). NITB has identified key product areas as the overarching focus for product development, management and marketing. Our natural landscape provides opportunities to develop products in areas such as golf, soft adventure, walking and cycling as well as niche areas such as cruising, canoeing and angling. Investment is required to develop the range, quality and access to facilities, suitable transport and facilities in accommodation.

The Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission is responsible for the promotion and development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough for commercial and recreational purposes, and for the development of marine tourism in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

The Loughs Agency has applied for funding under the Interreg IV programme to facilitate the implementation of its Marine Tourism and Angling Development plans to 2013 and is currently awaiting a Letter of Offer from the Special EU Programmes Body. This application included a number of key projects in the Foyle system.

The Loughs Agency has also established a Sustainable Development Fund to fund marine tourism and angling development projects throughout the Foyle and Carlingford Areas. This fund has already committed approximately £92,000 to 24 projects in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas, and expressions of interest have been received for further projects in 2009.

NITB is currently working with Derry City Council and ILEX, the Urban Regeneration Company for the Derry City Council area, on the draft Tourism Development Strategy for the city, within which the river has been identified as a key cluster for development. A three year costed development plan will be one of the outputs of this work.

Gaelic Football and Hurling

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of Gaelic Football and Hurling being marketed as a tourist product. (AQW 4742/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The promotional potential of the sporting traditions such as Gaelic Football and Hurling are represented in Tourism Ireland's global marketing communications through its suite of 41 websites in 19 languages, in market literature and in promotional and publicity campaigns in key markets. It is recognised that their portrayal can play a role in helping potential visitors to envisage some of the unique and compelling aspects of a holiday in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10 day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4844/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: While it is too early to provide meaningful statistics on this matter, the Department and its NDPBs are working with Account NI to ensure payments are processed as quickly as possible while ensuring appropriate processes are followed.

Northern Ireland Electricity

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to ensure that Northern Ireland Electricity charges return to a rate similar to that before the massive increase in the price of oil, which has since dropped significantly. (AQW 4938/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has no role in determining energy prices but strives to create market conditions that, over the long term may help drive down energy prices. The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (the Utility Regulator) is the expert body set up to engage with energy providers on regulatory matters, including the setting of tariffs, legislation requires that it does this independently of government.

The Utility Regulator has a statutory obligation to protect the interests of electricity consumers with regard to price and quality of service by promoting effective competition in the generation, transmission and supply of electricity. The Utility Regulator also ensures that NIE Energy profits do not exceed an imposed cap, which is a very low margin in business terms.

Electricity in Northern Ireland is mostly generated from natural gas and coal. The determinants of the price of electricity in Northern Ireland are not therefore simply linked to the current price of crude oil. NIE Energy took a decision to advance purchase a significant proportion of their power generation, and given significant increases in wholesale energy costs over the summer and early autumn in 2008, this seemed a prudent action to protect consumers over the winter period.

As wholesale energy costs have fallen considerably since then, this strategy means that NIE Energy is unable to pass on the full benefit of lower wholesale energy costs to consumers. However, NIE's Power Procurement business had greater flexibility, and savings to consumers were passed on through the 10.8 % reduction in tariffs effective from 1 January 2009.

My officials continue to engage with NIE and the Utility Regulator's office to maximise the potential for price reductions and will continue to work with these bodies to identify any further possible opportunities to minimise electricity costs for Northern Ireland consumers.

Invest NI

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment the (i) number and (ii) monetary value of offers to Invest NI client companies this year in comparison with last year. (AQW 4946/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below shows the number of offers approved by Invest NI during the period 1st April 2008 to 31st January 2009 and a comparison for the same period last year (2007/08). The table also includes the amount of assistance contained in these offers and the variance to the same period last year.

INVEST NI ASSISTANCE OFFERED (APRIL 2008 – JANUARY 2009) WITH PREVIOUS YEAR COMPARISON

	Position at 31st Jan 2008	Position at 31st Jan 2009	% Variance
Number of Offers	1,822	1,965	8% Increase
Assistance Offered	£67m	£129m	92% Increase

Note: Figures are provisional and subject to change.

Consideration should be given to the current economic climate when analysing this information. An 'approved offer' merely reflects an intention to invest in the future and recent evidence suggests that many offers will be 'banked' by clients to be implemented in the medium-term upturn.

Greyhound Racing Circuit

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what correspondence she has had with the Department of the Environment about an application for (i) a greyhound racing circuit; (ii) a horse training track; and (iii) a four star hotel in Stranocum; and to provide an estimate of how many jobs could this project might create. (AQW 4955/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The only correspondence the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or its agencies has been involved in regarding this project is a Planning Consultation issued to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board by Planning Service.

The application identified that 10 persons were employed in the existing facility and that the expected increase in employees as a result of the project was not known.

Greyhound Racing Circuit

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the proposal for a (i) greyhound racing circuit; (ii) horse training track; and (iii) four star hotel in Stranocum, in relation to job creation and if she has considered giving any support to the project. (AQW 4957/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Other than a Planning Consultation issued to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board by Planning Service neither the Department nor its agencies have had any involvement in this proposal. Therefore no consideration has been given to possible job creation and no application has been received for financial support.

Loan Guarantee Scheme

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what actions her Department is taking to encourage local banks to sign up to the UK Government's Loan Guarantee Scheme. (AQW 4970/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI and Invest NI continue to work with the UK Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), the local banks, relevant stakeholders and businesses to ensure that Northern Ireland takes full advantage of the national schemes on offer.

Invest NI is engaging with the banking sector to examine financing solutions for businesses during the economic downturn. Over 30 meetings have taken place with Bank representatives over the past year involving members of Invest NI's Board and Senior Management Team. These discussions have included a particular emphasis on the previous Small Firms Loan Guarantee and the new Enterprise Finance Guarantee schemes.

My Department also facilitated a visit to Northern Ireland on 6 February by the BERR Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson. At a lunch with the business and banking community, he assured those present that the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme was designed to be easier to administer by the banks than its predecessor scheme, the Small Firms Loan Guarantee and the banking representatives were encouraged to consider this finance tool when discussing options with clients.

Small Businesses: Grants for

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what grants are available for small businesses. (AQW 5189/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI continues to offer a wide range of support to encourage the growth and development of the small business sector. Invest NI focuses on working with those manufacturing and tradable service businesses that demonstrate the greatest export potential and the prospect

of improving productivity by becoming more internationally competitive. To qualify for Invest NI assistance or support, a business must demonstrate that currently, or over the following three years, they will:

- Have total sales of over £100,000 per annum;
- Have sales outside of NI greater than 25 per cent of turnover, or greater than £250,000 per annum; and,
- Be capable of and willing to work with Invest NI.

For locally-owned businesses in the tradable services sector additional qualifying criteria are:-

- The potential to sustain salaries above the Northern Ireland Private Sector median; and / or,
- A minimum gross profit margin of 20 per cent shown to be achievable.

A qualifying business will have access to all aspects of Invest NI's extensive Business Development Solutions portfolio consisting of professional advice, assistance (financial and non-financial) and support for businesses across the following 6 key areas:

- Strategy Development;
- People Development;
- Research and Development;
- Exporting;
- Energy Management; and
- E-Business.

A copy of the Invest NI Business Development Solutions brochure can be obtained from the Publications Section on Invest NI's website at http://www.investni.com/bds_brochure_march_06.pdf.

Invest NI has also continued to introduce new schemes focused on supporting small business growth. The Growth Accelerator Programme (GAP), for example, which was launched in June 2007, to assist SMEs to grow faster in export markets, Invest NI also continually seeks to rationalise, streamline and refresh its portfolio of service offerings, and operates a wide range of schemes to support the development of start ups and small businesses

Over the last few months, Invest NI has developed a programme of actions and initiatives designed to enable businesses to tackle the potential impact of a sustained economic downturn. In particular, it has focused on the areas of cash flow management, cost reduction and improving production efficiency.

Demolition Contractors

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what powers does her Department have to control the activities of demolition contractors. (AQW 5192/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has no powers to control the activities of demolition contractors in deciding whether it is appropriate for a particular building to be demolished. However the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSNI) which is sponsored by DETI can exercise powers but only in so far as they relate to ensuring that the actual demolition operation is carried out safely.

Construction Industry: Job Losses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many jobs have been lost in the construction industry in the last six months. (AQO 2142/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Information on the net change in employee jobs in the period June –December 2008 from the Quarterly Employment Survey is not due to be published until 18th March 2009.

However, the number of claimants of unemployed benefits whose usual occupation was in construction¹ has increased from 5,925 persons in July 2008 to 10,125 persons in January 2009.

This represents an increase of 4,200 persons or 71% over the last six months.

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).

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the individual who sought clarification on the definition of Londonderry in relation to Project Kelvin was told it included the County, is the same person who owns the land where it is proposed to locate the telehouse in Coleraine. (AQW 5249/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The clarification was asked at the Open Day, held for prospective bidders on the 21st July 2008, following the release of the Invitation to Tender. My Department has a record of those who attended the meeting, the questions asked, and the responses given. There is no record of who asked the individual questions.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if any member of the DUP lobbied her to have the Project Kelvin telehouse located in Coleraine. (AQW 5250/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The decision to locate the facility in Coleraine was taken by Hibernia Atlantic and submitted in its tender for the Project. I was not subject to lobbying by any member of my party.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she is aware that MPD consultants who drew up the tender specification for the Project Kelvin telehouse contract, has at least one former employee of Hibernia Atlantic on its staff. (AQW 5251/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Officials in the Department were aware that MPD Consultants had a former employee of Hibernia Atlantic on its staff. However, the employee in question was not part of the team that drew up the Invitation to Tender, nor were they involved in any way in the evaluation of the tenders.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she or any officials from her Department held a meeting with the DUP's Adrian McQuillan about the location of the Project Kelvin telehouse, prior to it being designated in Coleraine. (AQW 5252/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Neither I nor my officials have had any meetings with Adrian McQuillan about the location of the Project Kelvin telehouse.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department's project manager for Project Kelvin, met Coleraine City Councils 'in committee', in private before the contract was awarded to Coleraine. (AQW 5253/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department's Project Manager did attend a special meeting with Coleraine Borough Council on 3 December 2008. This meeting took place after the announcement of the 'preferred bidder' and at the request of Coleraine Borough Council. The contract was subsequently signed on 22 December 2008.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment the grade of the civil servant who changed the geographical location for the telehouse from the city of Derry/Londonderry to Coleraine; and under whose authority or interest he was acting. (AQW 5318/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The preparation of the Invitation to Tender was undertaken by a project team (and overseen by the Project Board) comprising representatives from DETI, DCENR, Central Procurement Directorate and MPD (technical consultants for the project). DETI was represented by the Kelvin project manager; this post is graded at Deputy Principal level. Following the release of the Invitation to Tender, an Open Day was held for prospective tenderers. At this meeting a question was asked regarding where the telehouse was located and it was clarified that it could be located anywhere in County Londonderry. The project team did not consider it necessary to consult with senior management or the Project Board before giving the clarification as it was not considered to have any material impact on delivery of the project objectives.

ENVIRONMENT

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how many Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) were issued by each Council, in each year since their inception; and what was the total cost incurred by each Council in issuing them. (AQW 4672/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Eight of the 26 district councils have been involved in the issue of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), since their inception in 2004. In most cases councils have worked as partners in an inter-agency forum, with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in the lead. Administration costs average £2,500 for each case, with the exception of one prolonged investigation which cost approximately £20,000. Down District Council and Larne Borough Council are the only councils that applied to the Court to issue ASBOs and therefore, incurred legal costs. Details provided by the councils are summarised in the table below.

Year	District Council	ASBOs	
		No.Issued	Detail
2005	Coleraine	6	PSNI in lead
	Larne	2	Legal fees £7,234
2006	Belfast	1	A two-year ASBO issued following six interim Orders.
	Castlereagh	1	PSNI in lead
	North Down	2	PSNI in lead
2007	Antrim	2	One order issued on conviction. One with PSNI in lead
	Fermanagh	1	PSNI in lead
	North Down	2	PSNI in lead.
2008	Antrim	1	Order issued on conviction
	Down	1	Legal fees £2,463
	Fermanagh	1	PSNI in lead
	Larne	2	Legal fees £2,077
	Lisburn	1	Order issued on conviction
	North Down	3	PSNI in lead

Year	District Council	ASBOs	
		No.Issued	Detail
2009	Carrickfergus	1	Administration costs approximately £20,000

Antisocial Behaviour Contracts

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how many Anti-Social Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) were issued by each Council, in each year since their inception; and what was the total cost incurred by each Council in issuing them. (AQW 4673/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Five councils have been involved in the issue of Anti-Social Behaviour Contracts (ABCs), since their inception in 2004. Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have taken the lead in these cases and councils therefore, incurred only administration costs (average cost £2,500 per case). Details provided by the councils are summarised in the table below.

Year	District Council	No. Contracts Issued
2005	Coleraine	2
	Fermanagh	4
2006	Coleraine	4
	Omagh	8
2007	Antrim	5
	Banbridge	1
	Coleraine	1
	Omagh	3
2008	Banbridge	1
	Coleraine	4
	Fermanagh	3
	Omagh	3

Derry/Londonderry: Walls

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's plans along with those of the City Council, to have the Walls of Derry/Londonderry listed with World Heritage Status. (AQW 4712/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has responsibility to consider any proposal for World Heritage Status in Northern Ireland, and, to decide if it is appropriate to recommend its inclusion on the UK Tentative List to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in London. As a result, the Department cannot plan to have the Walls nominated but is however advising on the process.

No formal proposal has yet been received for consideration from Derry City Council. However staff in the Department - and in particular the Northern Ireland Environment Agency - have had significant and continuing contact with the City Council. If a proposal is received, it will be given close and careful attention by the Department which has already indicated, in 2006, a willingness, in principle, to support such a bid if an appropriate initial case is made.

Wind Farms: Planning Applications for

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment the number of planning applications for wind farms which have been approved and his assessment of the potential energy from these wind farms. (AQW 4726/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service has granted planning permission for 34 planning applications for wind farms for some 283 turbines and which have a combined generating capacity of 439.4MW.

Wind Farms: Planning Applications for

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to give details of the planning applications for wind farms currently being considered; the date they were submitted, and the potential energy generated by each of these wind farms. (AQW 4728/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are currently 51 valid planning applications for wind farms / turbines (to specifically provide energy for the National Grid) with the potential to produce a total of 1,163.55MW.

Proposed Wind Farms

Application	Reference	Location	No. Turbines	Capacity (MW)	Date Submitted
Tullinoid	L/2004/0472	Fermanagh	9	15.75	08/03/04
Slieve Kirk	A/2004/1130	Derry	21	63	29/10/04
Tievenameenta	J/2005/0104	Strabane	22	66	21/01/05
Carrickatane	J/2005/0211	Strabane	9	27	11/02/05
Gortmonly	J/2005/0213	Strabane	6	18	11/02/05
Eglish	A/2005/0223	Derry	9	27	11/02/05
Drumadarragh	U/2005/0281	Newtonabbey	4	11.5	16/05/05
Ora More	L/2005/3070	Fermanagh	9	20.9	15/12/05
Crockdun	K/2006/0074	Omagh	9	27	20/01/06
Cregganconroe	K/2006/0242	Omagh	7	14	31/01/06
Carn Hill	U/2006/0054	Newtonabbey	11	22	31/01/06
Gortfinbar	K/2006/1089	Omagh	5	11.5	03/04/06
Pollnalaght	K/2006/1368	Omagh	12	30	08/06/06
Gortgall	L/2006/1197	Fermanagh	8	18.4	28/03/06
Altgolan	J/2006/0840	Strabane	7	17.5	21/08/06
Seegronan	J/2006/0883	Strabane	9	20.7	21/08/06
Elginny Hill	G/2006/0754	Ballymena	22	44	02/08/06
Eshmore	M/2006/1802	Dungannon	7	21	04/09/06
Inishative	K/2006/1793	Omagh	8	24	17/10/06
Corby Knowe	T/2006/0832	Antrim	3	9	17/10/06
Slatbeg	M/2006/1754	Dungannon	9	20.7	29/08/06
Rathsherry	G/2006/0842	Ballymena	16	36.8	06/09/06
Glenconway	B/2006/0607	Limavady	11	30	19/12/06
Castlecraig	K/2006/1934	Omagh	25	75	22/11/06
Ballyreagh Tempo	L/2006/2371	Fermanagh	1	2.5	22/11/06
Altahullion III	B/2007/0006	Limavady	15	34.5	05/01/07
Glenbuck II	D/2006/0599	Ballymoney	5	15	01/12/06
Clunahill	K/2007/0547	Omagh	7	21	22/05/07
Gronan	J/2007/0667	Strabane	15	34.5	02/10/07
Callagheen Ext	L/2007/1772	Fermanagh	6	13.8	06/12/07
Dunbeg	B/2007/0560	Limavady	14	42	11/12/07
Dunmore	B/2007/0563	Limavady	8	24	13/12/07

Application	Reference	Location	No. Turbines	Capacity (MW)	Date Submitted
Brockaghboy	C/2007/1186	Coleraine	20	60	14/12/07
Koram Hill	J/2007/0309	Strabane	6	13.8	10/05/07
Tullywisker	J/2007/0700	Strabane	3	6	29/10/07
Shantavny Scotch	M/2007/1407	Dungannon	7	14	29/10/07
Farkland	B/2007/0562	Limavady	17	51	12/12/07
Slieveglass	J/2008/0088	Strabane	3	6.9	28/01/08
Crockbrack	I/2008/0157	Cookstown	2	6	11/02/08
Curraghmulkin	K/2008/0334	Omagh	17	39.1	12/03/08
Lisnamuck	C/2008/0163	Coleraine	3	6	21/02/08
Teiges	L/2008/0459	Fermanagh	5	12.5	31/03/08
Cappagh	M/2008/0476	Dungannon	3	9	14/04/08
Aghamore	J/2008/0278	Strabane	5	15	01/05/08
Meenakeeran	J/2008/0240	Strabane	8	24	14/04/08
Slieve Croob	Q/2007/0914	Banbridge	2	4.6	27/12/07
Molly Mountain	L/2008/1113	Fermanagh	7	21	15/08/08
Corkey Ext	D/2008/0404	Ballymoney	1	2.5	04/09/08
Beltonanean	I/2008/0684	Cookstown	2	2.6	13/10/08
Crockbaravally	K/2008/1153	Omagh	3	6.9	05/12/08
Mullynaveagh	M/2008/1327	Dungannon	2	4.6	05/12/08
Total: 51			445	1163.55	

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications are in the system awaiting the issue of ‘Green Papers’.
(AQW 4743/09)

The Minister of the Environment: While it is not yet known how many applications will be approved the total number of planning applications currently in the system pending a decision at 30 September 2008 is 15,835.

These figures are extracted from my Department’s published Development Management Statistics for 2007/2008 and the 2008/09 First and Second Quarterly Statistical Bulletin which provides data up to 30 September 2008. This figure includes those applications deferred due to the former Draft PPS14 and current PPS21.

The next Development Management quarterly statistics are due for publication in March 2009.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what is the longest waiting time for applicants to receive their ‘Green Papers’ confirming planning approval.
(AQW 4744/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As this question does not specify a time period, to provide an accurate figure can only be done by a manual search of all my Department’s historic files. This information would not be readily available and would incur disproportionate costs.

However, my Department is fully committed to meeting Ministerial targets which set out the time taken to process planning applications to decisions or withdrawal by 31 March 2011. These are as follows;

- 60% of Major planning applications processed in 23 weeks;
- 70% of Intermediate planning applications processed in 31 weeks; and,

- 80% of Minor planning applications processed in 18 weeks.

Often the processing times of major applications can be longer due to the complexity of the proposal, the need for additional information and applicant delay.

Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what additional resources have been allocated to the Divisional Planning Office in Downpatrick. (AQW 4766/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Over the past 12 months 11 additional staff members have been allocated to the Divisional Planning Office in Downpatrick. This includes the Divisional Support Team which is currently in place to reduce the current level of live planning applications.

Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many additional staff have been allocated to the Divisional Planning Office in Downpatrick, in the last year. (AQW 4767/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Over the past 12 months 11 additional staff members have been allocated to the Divisional Planning Office in Downpatrick. This includes the Divisional Support Team which is currently in place to reduce the current level of live planning applications.

Planning Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to instruct Planning Service to have enforcement officers on call outside normal office hours to deal with the demolition of protected buildings and trees. (AQW 4794/09)

The Minister of the Environment: At present I have no plans to instruct Planning Service to have enforcement officers on call outside normal office hours to deal with the demolition of protected buildings or felling of trees mainly for resource reasons as such events happen on few occasions. However, in practice, local staff have investigated and monitored sites that may be at risk from an unauthorised breach in planning control.

On the spot enforcement action is not possible due to the need for enforcement officers to fully assess the situation prior to the drawing up and serving of Enforcement notices.

Demolition of Dwellings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the circumstances in which a stop notice can be served on a developer seeking to demolish a dwelling in an area of townscape character. (AQW 4795/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Article 73 of the 1991 Order enables my Department to serve a Stop Notice, which can prohibit, almost immediately, any activity to which an accompanying Enforcement Notice relates.

My Department can only serve a Stop Notice at the same time or after the service of an Enforcement Notice, once a breach of planning control has been carried out.

Article 67E of the 1991 Order enables my Department to issue a Temporary Stop Notice once a breach of planning control has been identified. This differs from the normal stop notice powers because the temporary stop notice does not have to wait for an Enforcement Notice to be issued. The temporary stop notice expires 28 days after the display of the notice on the site. During this time, my Department must decide whether it is appropriate to take enforcement action.

Alternatively, under Article 76b of the 1991 Order, my Department now has express power where it considers it necessary or expedient to apply to the High Court or County Court for an injunction to restrain or prevent a breach of planning control.

The decision to apply for an injunction is a matter of judgement for my Department and is based on sound evidence that a potential breach of planning control will occur.

Newcastle: Demolition of Dwellings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what action may be taken on the demolition of 141 Central Promenade, Newcastle. (AQW 4797/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department is continuing to investigate this breach of planning control and is currently considering its options on the issue. While it is too early to speculate on what remedy may be sought, one possibility is the service of an enforcement notice requiring the construction of a building similar to the original. Should the matter progress, through enforcement, to the courts, the outcome and penalties would be decided by the judiciary. (The maximum possible fine for a breach of planning consent is currently £30,000).

Planning Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications were received by Planning Service for housing developments, in each quarter from 1 April 2007 to date. (AQW 4799/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The breakdown of planning applications for housing developments received in each quarter from 1 April 2007 to 30 September 2008 is as follows:

Year & Quarter	Number of Housing Applications Received by Planning Service
2007 / 2008 Quarter 1 (April 2007 – June 2007)	870
2007 / 2008 Quarter 2 (July 2007 – September 2007)	947
2007 / 2008 Quarter 3 (October 2007 – December 2007)	833
2007 / 2008 Quarter 4 (January 2008 – March 2008)	830
2008/2009 Quarter 1 (April 2008 – June 2008)	647
2008/2009 Quarter 2 (July 2008 – September 2008)	409

This information has been extracted from my Department's official Development Management Statistics for 2007/2008 and the 2008/09 First and Second Quarterly Statistical Bulletin which provides data up to 30 September 2008.

The next Development Management quarterly statistics are due for publication in March 2009.

Newcastle: Demolition of Dwellings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what was the level of protection given to 141 Central Promenade, Newcastle, which was demolished on 25th January 2009. (AQW 4801/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The level of protection is provided by the building being located within a proposed Area of Townscape Character (ATC) as designated in the Draft Ards and Down Area Plan 2015.

Within an ATC, consent is required for the demolition of a building. While an offence has not been committed, the Department is currently seeking legal advice on the next steps to be taken with regard to the breach of planning control and the possible remedies.

Clandeboyne Estate: Tree Protection Orders

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to place tree protection orders on woodland at Clandeboyne Estate, Bangor. (AQW 4815/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's Landscape Architects Branch (LAB) is not currently considering Tree Preservation Order (TPO) protection for the trees within the Clandeboye Estate, Bangor nor has the Branch been asked to do so by the Downpatrick Planning Division or Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan team.

LAB is currently unaware of any threat to the trees within the Clandeboye Estate which would be a requirement for such protection to be considered.

On the contrary, and to the best of LAB's knowledge, the trees within the Estate are the subject of good management practice, particularly as the Conservation Volunteers (CVNI) would be likely to assist with its management, located as they are within the Estate itself.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list all planning applications about which he has made representations to Planning Service since coming into office. (AQW 4847/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since coming to office, I have made a number of 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
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

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
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 Drumcrow Road, Drumcrow, 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 from 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
Old Courtauld's site Carrickfergus		Update

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
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
Lands to the North of 8-10 Berry Drive and to the South of 16-20 Berry Crescent, Jordanstown	4 Detached dwellings	Update
6 Glenkeen Avenue, Jordanstown, Newtownabbey BT37 0PH	Erection of 3 dwellings	Unhappy with the Department's decision
Site running from Railway viaducts, to Monkstown ABC including paths to Ards Drive, Devinish Drive and Glenville Road.	Construction of cycle paths/footways and one footbridge	Request to delay presentation to Council to allow the Minister to speak to the applicant
42 Circular Road, Jordanstown	Erection of 13 residential units	Request for details of how the decision was reached
Rear of 67-85 Circular Road, Jordanstown, BT37 ORD	Erection of 2 semi-detached dwellings	Request to delay the issue of decision notice until a further query is answered
Jordanstown Schools, 85 Jordanstown Road, Jordanstown, Newtownabbey BT37 0QE	Replacement special school	Request to meet
Knock Golf Club	Development of golf course incorporating a residential development	Request to meet
Adjacent to 209 Middle Road, Islandmagee, Larne	Alleged U/A Shooting Range/Gun Club	Update
26 Glenfall Road, Glenoe	Redevelopment	Update
31a Deerpark Road, Glenarm	Proposed replacement dwelling	Support
117 Raceview Road, Ballymena	Single storey extension to front side and rear of existing hatchery together with new detached egg store, laboratory, field office and combined heat and power plant (Amended layout – access detail	Update
Woodburn Road	Use of yard area for storage of commercial vehicles for bus travel business	Update on application and time frame for action on current use
Tesco, Minorca Place and 41 – 47 Ellis Street, Carrickfergus	Extension to existing foodstore, reconfiguration and provision of additional car parking and service yard access, landscaping and associated works	Update and information on application
Adjacent to Redland Road, Larne	Proposed Vodaphone Broadband Service Mast	Update
152 -158 The Roddens, Larne	Redevelopment of 152 – 158 The Roddens for 20 Apartments, 12 no semi- detached and 1 no detached dwelling with associated parking	Information
22 Hillhead Road, Ballycarry	Proposed residential development at 22 Hillhead Road, Ballycarry	Update
10 Chainé Memorial Road, Larne	Additional Windows	Update
95 Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus	Retrospective change of use from domestic double garage to mechanical workshop	Update

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
8 Ballycoose Road, Cairncastle, Larne	Two storey rear extension to dwelling with minor alterations to existing	Update
58 Ballyboley Road, Larne	Proposed 200m sq single storey dwelling in lieu of previously approved domestic building for the storage of vintage farm machinery	Update
134 B The Roddens, Larne	8 apartments	Meeting
21 Tureagh Road Larne	Slurry store	Meeting
122 Coast Road, Larne	Replacement garage	Meeting
Ballygally Castle Hotel, Coast Road Ballygally	Change of use and extension	Meeting
75 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Foodstore	Meeting
Land North of 7 Old Belfast Road, Larne	District Centre	Meeting
36 Waterfall Road, Larne	Dwelling	Meeting
Land 150m east of 115 Ballymena Road, Carnlough	Greenhouses	Meeting
13 Rhanbuoy Park, Carrickfergus	Demolition & erection of apartments	Meeting
109A Drumahoe Road, Larne	Apartments	Meeting
37 Knockfergus Park, Greenisland	Extension	Meeting
24 Whinfield, Larne	Gabion wall	Meeting
26 Victoria Avenue, Whitehead	Apartments	Meeting
65m west of 4 Junction Road Ballyclare	Store & entrance	Meeting
21 Tureagh Road, Larne	Shed/slurry tank	Meeting
54 Dickeystown Road, Glenarm	Replacement dwelling	Meeting
7,11,13 Old Shore Road, Carrickfergus	Apartments	Meeting
130-136 Curran road, Larne	Apartments	Meeting
Drumhoy Drive	General discussion	Meeting
4 Marine Road, Carnlough	Demolition & erection of apartments	Meeting
20 Hillhead Road, Ballycarry	New dwelling & garage	Meeting
Lands at 40 Brustin Brae Road, Larne	19 Dwellings	Meeting
Curran Point	Marina	Meeting
31 Larne Road, Carrickfergus	Apartments	Meeting
36 Waterfall Road, Larne	Replacement dwelling	Meeting
408 Coast Road, Glenarm	Refurbishment of hotel & residential units	Meeting
95A Knockagh Road, carrickfergus	Change of use to mechanical workshop	Meeting
21 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus	Apartments	Meeting
31 A Deerpark Road, Glenarm	Replacement dwelling	Meeting
Lands to rear of 63 & 65 Bankhall Road, Larne	Managers dwelling	Meeting
70m SE of 30 Ballyrickard Road, Larne	New dwelling & garage	Meeting
11 Ballycarney Road, Larne	Apartments	Meeting
Antiville Road, rear of 2-4 Tureagh Road, Larne	10 dwellings, 2 apartments	Meeting
Adjacent to 66 Woodburn Road, Carrickfergus	Storage of vehicles	Meeting

Site/Address	Detail	Support/Oppose
43 McCareys Loanen, Larne	Extension	Meeting
Lands adjacent to Bashfordsland, Marshallstown Road, Carrickfergus	Apartments	Meeting
25m SW of junction Deerpark Road/Larne Road, Ballynure	Paintball leisure complex	Meeting
Village Centre, car park, Coast Road, Larne	2 Storey building	Meeting
Lands at junction of Redlands Crescent and Redlands Road, Larne	Proposed mixed – use development comprising food superstore, multi screen cinema/ restaurant, stand alone restaurant, car parking and other associated site works	Telephone updates
111 Listoder Road, Saintfield	Moving a scrap business	Update

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what the average waiting time is for green papers to be issued confirming planning approval. (AQW 4849/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As I explained in my answer to AQW 4666/09, publically available average processing times for each Divisional Planning Office for 2007/08 and 2006/07 are contained within the Annual Development Management Report available on my Department's website. Annual processing times for 2008/09 will be available in October 2009.

The average number of weeks to process a planning application in my Department to approval in 2007/08 is as follows:

Categories of Planning Application	Average Number of Weeks to Issue an Approval Decision
Major Planning Application	27 weeks
Intermediate Planning Application	28 weeks
Minor Planning Application	16 weeks

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the latest court proceedings against Ulster Farm By-Products, (i) how many offences in total were considered by the court; (ii) to outline the sanctions imposed for each pollution incident; (iii) to detail which offences were considered by the court but were not directly punished; and (iv) to state whether the cumulative punishment of a £24,000 fine, plus costs, was arrived at by way of a plea bargain. (AQW 4853/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The offences and sanctions are set out in the following table.

Offence Date	Sanction
28 March 2007	£3,000
26 April 2007	£3,000
5 June 2007	£5,000
10 August 2007	£5,000
24 August 2007	£8,000

Permit breaches on the following dates were “taken into consideration” in setting the fine for the last offence listed in the table and so no offences were unpunished.

1 & 16 October 2007; 14 November 2007; 6 December 2007, 17 January 2008; 13 February 2008; 11 March 2008; 10 April 2008; 15 May 2008; 23 & 29 June 2008; 22 July 2008; 21 August 2008 and 4 September 2008.

The level of the fine was solely determined by the Court.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many meetings he has held with the three MEPs since devolution. (AQW 4861/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since taking up office I have had no meetings with any of the MEPs but my predecessor had 2 meetings, one with Jim Allister and one with Jim Nicholson.

Antrim: GAA Stadium

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment if there have been any proposals submitted to his Department for a GAA stadium in Antrim. (AQW 4862/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of any planning application for a GAA stadium in Antrim.

However, a planning application was received on 10 November 2008 for a GAA Centre of Excellence in Antrim. The site is located on either side of the railway embankment between 105 Ballymena Road, 1 & 1a Dunsilly Road and 14 Niblock Road, Dunsilly, Antrim.

The application was designated under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order on 23 December 2008.

The proposal includes 4 x full size pitches, 1 training pitch, a warm-up area, 10 temporary changing rooms, 1 temporary meeting room/kitchen facilities, a hurling wall, floodlights, pitch maintenance & storage building including a generator for floodlights, pitch catch-nets, low level fencing, hardstanding for 85 car parking spaces, 13 disabled spaces & 2 coach spaces, 15m high net adjacent to railway line, improved entrance including off-site road works, circulation areas, landscaping, boundary treatment and fencing and associated works.

I am not aware of any name to be given to the centre.

Antrim: GAA Stadium

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment of any planning proposal received by his Department for a GAA stadium in Antrim. (AQW 4864/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of any planning application for a GAA stadium in Antrim.

However, a planning application was received on 10 November 2008 for a GAA Centre of Excellence in Antrim. The site is located on either side of the railway embankment between 105 Ballymena Road, 1 & 1a Dunsilly Road and 14 Niblock Road, Dunsilly, Antrim.

The application was designated under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order on 23 December 2008.

The proposal includes 4 x full size pitches, 1 training pitch, a warm-up area, 10 temporary changing rooms, 1 temporary meeting room/kitchen facilities, a hurling wall, floodlights, pitch maintenance & storage building including a generator for floodlights, pitch catch-nets, low level fencing, hardstanding for 85 car parking spaces, 13 disabled spaces & 2 coach spaces, 15m high net adjacent to railway line, improved entrance including off-site road works, circulation areas, landscaping, boundary treatment and fencing and associated works.

I am not aware of any name to be given to the centre.

Antrim: GAA Stadium

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of any planning application received by his Department for a proposed GAA stadium in Antrim. (AQW 4865/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of any planning application for a GAA stadium in Antrim.

However, a planning application was received on 10 November 2008 for a GAA Centre of Excellence in Antrim. The site is located on either side of the railway embankment between 105 Ballymena Road, 1 & 1a Dunsilly Road and 14 Niblock Road, Dunsilly, Antrim.

The application was designated under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order on 23 December 2008.

The proposal includes 4 x full size pitches, 1 training pitch, a warm-up area, 10 temporary changing rooms, 1 temporary meeting room/kitchen facilities, a hurling wall, floodlights, pitch maintenance & storage building including a generator for floodlights, pitch catch-nets, low level fencing, hardstanding for 85 car parking spaces, 13 disabled spaces & 2 coach spaces, 15m high net adjacent to railway line, improved entrance including off-site road works, circulation areas, landscaping, boundary treatment and fencing and associated works.

I am not aware of any name to be given to the centre.

Antrim: GAA Stadium

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to any proposal he has received for a GAA stadium in Antrim, if he is aware of the name to be given to the stadium. (AQW 4866/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of any planning application for a GAA stadium in Antrim.

However, a planning application was received on 10 November 2008 for a GAA Centre of Excellence in Antrim. The site is located on either side of the railway embankment between 105 Ballymena Road, 1 & 1a Dunsilly Road and 14 Niblock Road, Dunsilly, Antrim.

The application was designated under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order on 23 December 2008.

The proposal includes 4 x full size pitches, 1 training pitch, a warm-up area, 10 temporary changing rooms, 1 temporary meeting room/kitchen facilities, a hurling wall, floodlights, pitch maintenance & storage building including a generator for floodlights, pitch catch-nets, low level fencing, hardstanding for 85 car parking spaces, 13 disabled spaces & 2 coach spaces, 15m high net adjacent to railway line, improved entrance including off-site road works, circulation areas, landscaping, boundary treatment and fencing and associated works.

I am not aware of any name to be given to the centre.

Departmental Staff Numbers

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of staff employed by his Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4904/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

Grade	Permanent	Casual Staff	Total
Analogous Grades	May-07		
Grade 5+	17		17
Grade 6	21		21
Grade 7	124		124
DP	287		287
SO	454		454
EOI	495	17	512
EOII	200		200
AO	865		865
AA	230	97	327
Industrial	88		88
Total	2781	114	2895

- (i) The full range of figures is not available as we cannot disaggregate the casual staff in to NICS casuals as they are distinct from agency workers.
- (ii) The breakdown at January 2009 is detailed in the table below. The figures for casual staff include NICS casual staff and agency workers. Of the 308 casual staff listed there are 173 agency workers employed as in the Administration (58) and Industrial (45) groups.

Grade &	Permanent	Casual Staff	Total staff
Analogous Grades	Jan-09		
Grade 5 +	16		16
Grade 6	21		21
Grade 7	110		110
DP	311		311
SO	512	1	513
EOI	490	70	560
EOII	188	15	203
AO	952	66	1018
AA	195	111	306
Industrial	82	45	127
	2877	308	3185

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency investigation of the case regarding Warren Road, Donaghadee, if he can confirm that investigations will be carried out quickly and thoroughly and not stalled unreasonably because of any inability to question the alleged perpetrators. (AQW 4940/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I can assure you that officials within NIEA's Environmental Crime Unit will carry out this investigation as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. They must, however, work within the parameters of the Police and Criminal Evidence Order (PACE) and with regard to proper investigatory practices, including the Evidentiary Test and Public Interest, as well Article 6 (Right to a Fair Trial) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The objective of an investigation is to collect the facts and this process must be thorough, systematic and comprehensive. Incomplete or hastily conducted investigations will be counter-productive.

Planning Service

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment when the e-PIC system will be launched by Planning Service. (AQW 4951/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Partial implementation of e-PIC has already commenced within the Planning Service and a number of e-planning facilities will be made available to the public through our new internet website over the next 6-8 weeks.

It is projected the complete e-PIC system will be fully implemented across Planning Service by March 2010.

Lough Cowey Reservoir: Illegal Dumping

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of the methodology used to establish the amount of illegal dumping that occurred at the Lough Cowey reservoir in 2008. (AQW 4974/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As with all cases of alleged illegal dumping reported to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the Lough Cowey incident was first recorded and logged. It was then passed to an investigating officer responsible for that area, who arranged and undertook a site visit, where an investigation of alleged offences was carried out.

In this case the report had named a specific individual. That person was contacted and an informal meeting arranged to establish the facts. An examination of the evidence gathered concluded that there was not enough evidence to forward the case to the PPS for prosecution; the main information was either circumstantial or unsubstantiated allegations, while photographs given to NIEA were not able to be used as evidence in a court of law.

MOT Tests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment how many MOT tests have been carried out within the 18 minute target figure, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4996/09)

The Minister of the Environment: This is not a target for the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). The DVA target for vehicle testing is, 85% of all applications appointed within 21 days or at a later date requested by the customer. At 7 February 2009 the year to date performance against the target was 92.64%.

The 18 minute test time is a performance indicator within the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) Contract that provided for the contractor to design, finance and build computerised and calibrated test lanes at DVA's 15 test centres between 2001 and 2003, and to refresh and maintain them for a period of 15 years thereafter. DVA vehicle examiners would continue to be responsible for operating the equipment. The Agency's view is that the 18 minute test time is an inappropriate indicator, derived from testing in a non live environment. This issue is being addressed as part of a performance review of the PFI Contract.

At 31 January 2009 the year to date actual average test time for MOT tests was 20 minutes.

Capital Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment if there are any major capital projects in his Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5002/09)

The Minister of the Environment: (i) To date, no major capital projects have been delayed by lack of finance due to the recession. The waste infrastructure programme has three major projects that are still in the preparation stage. Although my Department will provide up to £200M towards the capital investment, private sector funding is anticipated to provide the remaining finances. The source of the private finance will be confirmed during the Competitive Dialogue element to the procurement process.

(ii) Key waste infrastructure programme projects are not being delayed by the planning system. Applications from the Waste Management Groups have not been submitted yet and will enter the system over the next year to 18 months. Three waste cases currently in the Pre-application Discussion system are making satisfactory progress. Experience gained in these cases will help key consultees and Planning Service expedite important waste infrastructure cases through the system.

Limavady and Coleraine Borough Council Areas: Disposal of Fish Process Effluence

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration has been given to the impact of the discharge of 180,000 metric tonnes of fish process effluence on blue flag beaches and areas of conservation in the (i) Limavady; and (ii) Coleraine Borough Council areas. (AQW 5011/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is required to control the deposition of materials below the High Water Mean Spring Tide mark to a distance of twelve nautical miles from the Northern Ireland coast. This is carried out by means of a licensing process under Part II of the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 (FEPA).

In determining a licence application, the Department shall have regard to:

- protecting the marine environment of Northern Ireland;
- the living resources which it supports;
- human health;
- preventing interference with legitimate uses of the sea; and
- such matters as it considers relevant.

A FEPA licence application for the disposal of the fish process effluent was received by the NIEA on 8 December 2008. A full statutory and public consultation on the application was initiated on 17 December 2008.

On 2 February 2009, NIEA was officially contacted by the applicant's Consulting Engineers withdrawing the application for the FEPA licence for the disposal of the fish effluent. The Agency formally closed the FEPA application process for the disposal of the fish effluent on 4 February 2009 and issued notification of this to all the consultees in the application process.

Limavady and Coleraine Borough Council Areas: Disposal of Fish Process Effluence

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment if he will give assurance, prior to the issue of a FEPA licence, that none of the Limavady and Coleraine Borough Council areas will be effected by the disposal of fish process effluence. (AQW 5012/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A FEPA licence application for the disposal of the fish process effluent was received by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) on 8 December 2008. A full statutory and public consultation on the application was initiated on 17 December 2008.

On 2 February 2009, NIEA was officially contacted by the applicant's Consulting Engineers withdrawing the application for the FEPA licence for the disposal of the fish effluent. The Agency formally closed the FEPA application process for the disposal of the fish effluent on 4 February 2009 and issued notification of this to all the consultees in the application process.

New Local Government Authorities

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment how many full time jobs were there in local government in (i) 1980; (ii) 1990; (iii) 2000; and (iv) 2008; and to provide an estimate of the number of jobs that could be lost when the new local government authorities come into existence. (AQW 5018/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department does not hold the requested information centrally. The Department will request the information from the 26 local councils and will provide the member with a written response that will be placed in the Assembly Library.

It is too early to say how many jobs could be lost when the new local government authorities come into existence. However, the Executive has agreed that every possible effort will be made to avoid redundancies and that compulsory redundancy will only receive consideration when all other practical options have been exhausted. Staff will transfer to the new local government authorities with the protections of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE). This is the main piece of legislation governing the transfer of an undertaking, or part of one, to another. The Regulations are designed to protect the rights of employees in a transfer situation enabling them to enjoy the same contractual terms and conditions, with continuity of employment, as formerly. TUPE protection is not subject to any specific time limit. In addition, TUPE places significant constraints on the variation of these terms and conditions at a later stage.

Carrier Bags: Single Use

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if he plans to make use of the Schedule 6 of the Climate Change Act 2008 to introduce charges for single use carrier bags. (AQW 5030/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I prefer to await the outcome of the current voluntary agreement with leading UK retailers, which aims to reduce the number of carrier bags provided to customers by 50%, before taking any decision on whether or not to introduce charges. The agreement should result in around 5 billion fewer

bags being handed out. I fully support the voluntary agreement because, as I said at the time it was announced, it aims to significantly reduce the number of carrier bags without hitting people in the pocket.

Chaine Memorial Road in Larne: Apartment Development

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all representations made to his Department by politicians about the unauthorised apartment development at Chaine Memorial Road in Larne, in the last year. (AQW 5031/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There has been one only representation concerning this development from a politician in the last year. In my capacity as MP for the area I wrote to the Divisional Office on 11 November 2008 requesting an update on the current planning application.

Giant's Causeway: Visitors Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list all the bodies and individuals he met in connection with the National Trust planning application for a visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 5032/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In response to the first question I would refer the Member to my response to AQW 3727/09 published on 23 January 2009.

In response to the second question my Department has received representations from Seaport (NI) Ltd objecting to the proposal, and from Carson McDowell, solicitors acting on behalf of Seaport (NI) Ltd.

Giant's Causeway: Visitors Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to (i) list; and (ii) outline the nature of, all bodies and individuals who made written representations to his Department in connection with the National Trust planning application for a visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 5033/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In response to the first question I would refer the Member to my response to AQW 3727/09 published on 23 January 2009.

In response to the second question my Department has received representations from Seaport (NI) Ltd objecting to the proposal, and from Carson McDowell, solicitors acting on behalf of Seaport (NI) Ltd.

Legitimate Charities: Protection of

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment will he legislate to protect legitimate charities who use 'clothing banks' for fund-raising, by clamping down on unscrupulous operators who are installing bogus 'clothing banks' for self profit. (AQW 5042/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) already regulates Bring Bank containers, including 'clothing banks'. They must be registered in accordance with Paragraph 18 of Schedule 2, Part 1 of the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

The owners of Bring Bank containers not registered with NIEA in this way are guilty of carrying out an illegal waste activity in breach of Articles 4 and 5 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997 and The Controlled Waste (Duty of Care) Regulations (NI) 2002. Landowners allowing unregistered Bring Bank containers to be sited on their land are permitting an illegal waste activity to take place on their land and are likewise in breach of Articles 4 and 5 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and the Controlled Waste (Duty of Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002.

The NIEA Environmental Crime Team has powers to investigate such offences.

Stretch Limousines

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment when legislation to cover (i) testing; and (ii) licensing of American style stretch limousines, hired as private taxis, will be introduced. (AQW 5101/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department proposes to introduce new testing and licensing regulations for American style stretched limousines by January 2010.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to clarify the position of his Department in relation to a full public inquiry into the proposed runway extension at George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQW 5136/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A planning application accompanied by an Environmental Statement for an extension to the runway at the George Best Belfast City Airport was submitted to the Department on Friday 14 November 2008. The application was designated as one of major importance under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 on 23 December 2008.

Under the Article 31 procedure one option open to the Department is to cause a public local inquiry to be held by the Planning Appeals Commission. However, until such time as consideration of the proposal has taken place, I am not in a position to confirm the procedural route to be adopted.

My officials are progressing the application, as quickly as it is possible to do so, and I expect to be in a position to make a recommendation on the way forward in the near future.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider making the process for individual planning applications more transparent so that the reasons for delays are clear. (AQW 5216/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is committed to giving a transparent service to all interested parties involved in the development management planning application process and is required by law to make registers available for public inspection which comprises a copy of every application for planning permission together with copies of any plans, drawings, environmental information and decision notices. As well as the Register being available for inspection, the public have the right to inspect the application file through my Department's open file procedures. Applicants, agents and objectors use this facility on a daily basis to track progress on applications.

The time taken to process a planning application to determination will be influenced by whether or not full and adequate information is available to enable such a determination to be made, the complexity of the proposal, consultee input and will be subject to compliance with all relevant statutory processes including the consideration of objections / representations and Council input. The onus is clearly on the applicant to ensure that a comprehensive package of supporting information accompanies the planning application.

By the end of March this year, Planning Service will introduce an on-line system which will allow applicants, agents and the public to track progress of applications through the system from receipt to decision, using the Planning Service web site.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what actions he has taken since becoming Minister to contribute to meeting the target set out in the Programme for Government, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 25% below 1990 levels by 2025. (AQW 5286/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Achievement of the Programme for Government target on greenhouse gas emissions is the collective responsibility of all Northern Ireland Ministers.

My Department continues to progress various pieces of legislation and planning policy including the Climate Change Act, the Carbon Reduction Commitment and Planning Policy Statement 18 on renewables.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what consultation he had with OFMDFM or the Executive prior to banning the 'Action on CO2' adverts that are being shown in the rest of the UK which could assist in achieving the Programme for Government's target to reduce green house gas emissions. (AQW 5288/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not banned the "Act on CO2" campaign and I have no wish to do so. I consider that, for transferred matters, Northern Ireland Ministers should have the right to decide how to promote Government policy. My decision not to use the campaign was based on this fundamental constitutional principle.

Planning Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the implications of the economic downturn on the Planning Service. (AQO 2071/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The economic downturn has impacted on the Planning Service in a number of ways. The number of planning applications received by the Agency between April and December 2008 has fallen by more than 27% compared with the corresponding period in 2007. While this reduction in overall numbers does help contribute towards the efforts of the Planning Service to reduce the live caseload of applications, it also has a negative impact on resources as a significant proportion of Planning Service funding comes from fee income derived from planning applications. For the year ending 31 March 2009, it is projected that the fee income will be approximately £16.7m; this is down £4.6m (or 22%) on fee income generated in the year ended 31 March 2008 (£21.3m). This reduction in income is creating resources pressures for the Planning Service and my officials are currently considering the most appropriate options for responding to this.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with the Executive in relation to amending the Programme for Government's current commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. (AQO 2072/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have had no discussions with the Executive in relation to amending the Programme for Government's current commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Areas of Conservation

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what penalties and sentences his Department can impose when buildings are demolished within areas of conservation. (AQO 2073/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department does not impose penalties and sentences in any circumstances; that is the responsibility of the courts.

Planning Policies

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of whether the current planning policies take sufficient account of economic development in reaching decisions. (AQO 2074/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am awaiting Executive clearance for the publication of Revised Planning Policy Statement 4 Economic Development which sets out updated planning policies for economic development.

Area Development Plans

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the current position on area development plans and if these will be in place prior to the transfer of planning functions to the new councils or granted following the transfer. (AQO 2075/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The table attached below outlines the current position for area development plans prepared by my Department. In the period up to the transfer of functions Planning Service will work to ensure that as far as possible current draft plans will be adopted before the transfer of planning powers. Should any plans remain at draft stage it is intended that the Department will complete the adoption of the plan. Consideration is currently ongoing regarding the transfer of these plans to the new Councils in 2011, including engagement with key stakeholders such as NILGA.

CURRENT POSITION OF DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Development Plan	Development Plan Stage			Current Position
	Issues Paper	Draft Plan	Adopted Plan	
Ards & Down Area Plan 2015	Published December 2000	Published December 2002	-	Public Inquiry closed on the 1st February 2007. The Department received the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Report on 14th March 2008 and is currently considering it and preparing the Plan for adoption, which is anticipated to take place during this business year.
Magherafelt Area Plan 2015	Published December 2000	Published April 2004 (Revision May 2005)	-	An Independent Examination (IE) of DMAP by PAC is currently underway. The first pre-examination meeting was held on 27th August 2008 and the second was held on 11 December 2008. Stage 1 of the IE commenced on 2nd February 2009.
Banbridge / Newry & Mourne Area Plan 2015	Published March 2001	Published August 2006(Revision March 2007)	-	DBNMAP is now proceeding to Independent Examination (IE) by the PAC. The first pre-examination meeting will take place on 11th March 2009. Stage 1 of the IE is programmed to commence on 17th August 2009.
Northern Area Plan 2016 (Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady & Moyle)	Published August 2002	Published May 2005	-	The SEA of the Plan is the subject of 2 legal challenges. Following a number of hearings and judgements and the lodgement of an appeal by the Department, the Court determined that matters should be considered by the European Court of Justice and the case has yet to be heard. Following legal advice, the Department has determined that progress towards an IE for DNAP should be put on hold until the outcome of this challenge is known.
Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (Belfast City, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey & North Down)	Published January 2002	Published November 2004 (Amendment No.1 Addenda & Revisions February 2006)	-	Public Inquiry closed on the 2nd May 2008. The timetable for the Plan Adoption will be dependent on the receipt of PAC Report. The PAC have given a preliminary indication that the report will be delivered to the Department by early summer 2010, but hope to provide a firmer date in the future.
Antrim, Ballymena & Larne Area Plan 2016	Published May 2002	-	-	The Department has temporarily ceased to carry out any further substantive work on the preparation of this Plan pending the outcome of ongoing legal proceedings.
Armagh Area Plan 2018	Published April 2004	-	-	The Department has temporarily ceased to carry out any further substantive work on the preparation of this Plan pending the outcome of ongoing legal proceedings.
West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 (Omagh & Strabane)	Published 18 October 2005	-	-	The Department has temporarily ceased to carry out any further substantive work on the preparation of this Plan pending the outcome of ongoing legal proceedings.
Cookstown Area Plan 2010	-	Published November 1999	June 2004	Plan adopted by the Department.

Development Plan	Development Plan Stage			Current Position
	Issues Paper	Draft Plan	Adopted Plan	
Craigavon Area Plan 2010	-	Published April 2000 (Revision Nov 2000)	August 2004	Plan adopted by the Department.
Dungannon and South Tyrone Area Plan 2010	-	Published May 2000	March 2005	Plan adopted by the Department.
Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries and Retail Designations Plan 2010	Published 23 March 2005	Published 20 December 2005	31 June 2008	Plan adopted by the Department, but is currently the subject of 2 separate legal challenges - one relating to the SEA of the Plan and one relating to the substance of the adopted Plan.
Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) Subject Plan for Belfast City Council Area 2015	Published 15 August 2005	Published 27 June 2006	15 Dec 2008	Plan adopted by the Department.
Coleraine Borough Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) Subject Plan 2016	Published 3 April 2006	-	-	It is now unlikely that this Plan will progress in advance of the resolution of the current legal proceedings taking place in relation to other draft Plans.
Fermanagh Area Plan 2007	-	-	March 1997	No formal review will be undertaken before the transfer of planning powers
Larne Area Plan 2010	-	-	March 1998	Plan intended to be superseded by the Antrim, Ballymena & Larne Area Plan 2016.
Derry Area Plan 2011	-	-	May 2000	Plan adopted by the Department.

Local Councils: Review

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the review of local councils.

(AQO 2076/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Steady effective progress is being made on the local government reform programme announced by my predecessor, Arlene Foster. The Policy Development Panels that were established last summer have already brought forward policy proposals agreed by the main parties on a number of key issues. These proposals cover such issues as the governance arrangements that will provide for inclusivity and appropriate checks and balances in the new councils, the community planning process, human resources, finance and estates. These proposals will inform the preparation of legislative proposals that will be brought before the Assembly in early 2010, following a consultation process.

In relation to the implementation of the programme, the majority of existing councils have now agreed their representation on the voluntary transition committees for each of the new council areas and a number of these committees have met. Legislation will be brought before the Assembly later this year to provide a statutory basis for the Transition Committees as they make preparations for the creation of the new councils in 2011. One of the Policy Development Panels is currently considering the governance arrangements for the Transition Committees and these will be included in the legislation.

Area Development Plans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the number of judicial reviews in progress in relation to area development plans.

(AQO 2077/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are currently four ongoing judicial reviews affecting area development plans. Two of these judicial reviews relate to the Draft Northern Area Plan 2016 and two to the adopted Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries and Retail Designations Plan 2010.

Lurgan Park

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment if he will consider adding Lurgan Park to the list of country parks and centres listed on his Departmental website. (AQO 2078/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department's own website, through a link to that of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), lists only country parks, visitor centres and other visitor attraction properties managed by NIEA. It would be inappropriate and impracticable also to list all local authority parks as we could not list one park without all the others.

Lurgan Park is already promoted through other websites including the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's www.discovernorthernireland.com site, Craigavon Borough Council's www.craigavon.gov.uk site, and the Park has its own site www.lurganpark.com.

However NIEA is currently upgrading its website. Were a comprehensive list of local authority-managed country parks and urban parks available on another accredited website, NIEA would consider providing a reciprocal hyperlink to that site from its own website entry on its country parks.

New District Councils

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the need for a shadow period for the new district councils after elections planned for 2011. (AQO 2079/09)

The Minister of the Environment: One of the critical issues I have addressed in progressing the local government reform programme is whether the new councils should operate in shadow form for a period after the May 2011 elections before assuming full power and responsibility. I considered this issue carefully, and sought the views of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the political parties through the Strategic Leadership Board. I concluded that I would not seek to provide for a shadow period and communicated my decision to Executive and local government colleagues in October 2008. My overriding consideration in reaching this decision was that the public expect to see modern, efficient services, including those transferred from central to local government, in place as soon as possible.

Statutory Transition Committees

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what powers statutory transition committees will have with regard to developing new area plans post May 2011. (AQO 2080/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As part of my commitment to the transfer of planning powers to local government, the power to draw up development plans will transfer from the Planning Service to the newly formed District Councils in May 2011. The Transition Committees will only operate in advance of May 2011, after which they will cease to exist and the newly formed councils will take over. My officials are currently giving consideration to how to make the transition of development plan powers to the new Councils as smooth as possible and how to move forward with the development plan programme in advance of transfer. A possible approach being considered would be for Planning Service to work on a number of 'pilot plans' with the respective RPA Transition Committees to carry out preparatory plan work for their areas, based on the new local development plan system.

Road Safety Council

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans for replacing the Road Safety Council. (AQO 2081/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to replace the Road Safety Council: the Council exists independently of the Department, and any decision to replace it would not be for me to make.

However, three successive reports by independent consultants have indicated that it is no longer fit for purpose in its present form, hence my decision to channel funding away from central administration and into the front line road safety activities of local committees.

Road Deaths

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the reasons for the reduction in the number of road deaths in 2008 compared to the previous year. (AQO 2082/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of road deaths in Northern Ireland during 2008 was 106. This was seven fewer than in 2007.

However, as there are so many variables, a year on year comparison could be potentially misleading, and it may be better to look at the trend over a 5-10 year period. In 1998, a total of 160 people were killed. In 2003 this had dropped to 150 and in 2007 to 113.

Progress over the six years since the introduction of the road safety strategy has been significant, with an overall reduction in road deaths of around 29%. The 2008 figure was also the lowest since records began in 1931.

It is difficult to measure the sole or unique contribution that any specific area of road safety makes towards reducing casualties, because of the wide range of factors involved. These include vehicle, road and traffic engineering; education and awareness; weather; roadside enforcement and penalties; along with public attitudes and various social and cultural factors.

The continued improvement is due to the sustained efforts of everybody involved including the Department for Regional Development's Road Service, the Department of Education, the Police Service, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service, all working in partnership with road users and members of the public themselves.

Although the downward trend in road deaths is to be welcomed, it must also be recognised there are still too many people dying on our roads and that we cannot be complacent. My Department will continue to do all in its power to ensure the downward trend in road deaths continues.

Waste Communication Strategy

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in relation to a waste communication strategy. (AQO 2084/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am keen to move forward as soon as possible with a waste communications strategy to ensure that key messages on waste are effectively communicated to people to bring about the behavioural changes necessary to reduce waste and improve environmental quality.

My Department has reconvened the Learning & Communications Forum to consider the way forward on a waste communications strategy. The Forum is a focussed stakeholder group to assist the delivery of consistent and appropriate key messages to business, communities, the public, households and the public sector. My Department has also secured the services of a specialist team from Morrow Communications to provide expert communications and PR support and a waste communications action plan over the next three months.

One initial action over the coming months, for example, will be to revise the "Wake up to Waste" website to cover more up to date and relevant key messages to encourage behavioural change. I also recognise that much good work is already taking place within District Councils and through organisations such as Bryson House to encourage behavioural change to reduce waste going to landfill.

I am pleased to be able to report that my Department is now taking action to deliver effective waste communications, though a lot of work will be required over the coming years to build on the good work already taking place and to bring about a fundamental change in our attitude and behaviour towards waste, how we can prevent it, recycle it and dispose of it in ways that are environmentally responsible and economically sensible.

Town Planning Committee

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment what contact he has made with the Town Planning Committee of Belfast City Council. (AQO 2085/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have made no formal contact with the Town Planning Committee of Belfast City Council since my appointment as Minister, nor have I sat on the Town Planning Committee since then.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Servants Dismissed from Posts

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many permanently employed civil servants were dismissed from their posts, in each of the past five years, broken down by grade. (AQW 3741/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The information requested is provided in the table attached. The data sourced is for each financial year and are the most recent figures available. The overall figures presented include both industrial and non-industrial staff and those analogous to general service grades in NI Government Departments and their Executive Agencies for the period.

	2007/08	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04
G5+	0	1	0	1	0
G6	0	0	0	0	0
G7	1	1	1	0	0
DP	2	1	1	0	1
SO	2	2	0	3	1
EOI	3	9	5	3	6
EOII	13	12	8	8	5
AO	37	29	40	35	23
AA	10	32	18	21	24
Industrial	3	7	15	0	8
Total	71	94	88	71	68

Rates Collection

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the costs of rates collection passed onto each individual council, in each of the past five years; and the proposed cost for the next financial year; and to account for increases in the total cost. (AQW 4402/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The attached table shows the cost of rate collection charged to each council for the period 2004-05 to 2007-08. It also shows the estimated costs for 2008-09 and 2009-10. The actual cost of collection for 2008-09 will not be available until Land & Property Services' accounts are finalised in May 2009.

Although the estimated cost of rate collection that will be charged to councils for 2008-09 is £6.7 million, it should be noted that this figure will be reduced by a one-off reduction of £600,000 in the cost of collection which I announced on 19 January 2009 as part of a package of measures to help councils. This reduction is reflected in the table.

During the five year period from 2004 to 2008 (using the 2008-2009 forecast) the cost of collection rose by 59%. The increase in costs can be attributed to –

- An unprecedented period of reform (including the first domestic revaluation in Northern Ireland for over 30 years) and new relief measures such as Rate Relief, Education, Training and Leaving Care, and Lone Pensioner Allowance, which required additional staff to implement the changes;
- The replacement of an obsolescent computer system to facilitate rating reform;
- Additional staff and resources to clear backlogs of rating casework e.g. vacancy inspections, certificates of revision, refunds and correspondence; and
- From 2007-2008 significantly higher court fees for legal proceedings to recover rating debt.

It is important to note that the rating system fundamentally changed in 2006-2007 and it is therefore difficult to draw direct comparison between the pre and post 2006-2007 systems.

The bulk of the increase occurred from 2006 onwards as the implementation of rating reform gathered pace generating significant extra work. The rating system now includes a much wider range of reliefs to provide assistance to eligible ratepayers.

COST OF COLLECTION CHARGED TO COUNCILS

District Portion of Cost of Collection						
2004-05 to 2007-08 and Estimated 2008-09 & 2009-10					Estimated	Estimated
	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Antrim	117,027	124,274	152,288	186,397	209,885	240,902
Ards	143,582	143,962	170,462	189,196	205,907	236,335
Armagh City & District	105,399	106,666	129,652	154,136	170,063	195,194
Ballymena	126,138	129,498	162,236	203,619	229,108	262,965
Ballymoney	46,139	46,744	56,056	68,638	74,700	85,739
Banbridge	83,540	84,774	102,262	127,755	138,955	159,489
Belfast	941,335	960,818	1,173,172	1,307,790	1,442,588	1,655,770
Carrickfergus	82,005	81,785	96,733	115,243	127,470	146,307
Castlereagh	133,587	132,630	156,833	173,607	188,532	216,393
Coleraine	140,396	141,131	170,979	204,829	226,410	259,869
Cookstown	54,203	56,476	69,737	83,826	92,170	105,791
Craigavon	181,272	190,141	234,243	297,317	321,401	368,897
Downpatrick	124,330	125,153	151,870	178,154	196,745	225,819
Dungannon & South Tyrone	80,776	84,197	103,913	124,964	138,856	159,375
Fermanagh	95,766	97,574	118,325	140,031	156,905	180,093
Larne	72,888	73,493	88,645	105,149	113,820	130,640
Limavady	57,493	57,574	70,012	91,624	100,933	115,849
Lisburn	239,757	233,643	277,048	327,338	354,498	406,885
Derry	245,420	249,612	311,144	374,387	410,355	470,996
Magherafelt	57,799	59,288	71,778	89,426	97,283	111,659
Moyle	33,811	34,473	41,295	49,386	54,954	63,075
Newry	177,811	181,835	217,915	247,027	271,538	311,665
Newtownabbey	192,857	193,742	232,787	281,449	310,331	356,191
North Down	182,834	181,791	215,784	237,326	265,447	304,675
Omagh	96,115	99,378	120,492	149,903	164,379	188,670
Strabane	58,572	59,440	72,204	91,214	100,749	115,637
	3,870,854	3,930,094	4,767,865	5,599,730	6,163,983	7,074,882

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department, and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4840/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel is committed to and is actively working towards meeting the 10 day prompt payment pledge.

Staff are aware of the priority being given to meeting this target and the need to minimise any delays in processing and approving invoices for payment.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many meetings he has had with each of the three MEPs from 2007 to date. (AQW 4893/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since my appointment as Minister for Finance and Personnel I have not met with any of the three Northern Ireland MEPs. My predecessor, Rt Hon Peter Robinson MP MLA, met with Jim Nicholson MEP on one occasion.

Tender Processes

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assurance that Northern Ireland companies will not be discriminated against or excluded from any tender processes, including those that might result through the manipulation of the tender criteria, in the next five years. (AQW 4977/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: All procurement activities undertaken by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and the Centres of Procurement Expertise are required, to comply with the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy, EU Procurement Directives and the UK Public Contracts Regulations 2006. In addition all procurement, regardless of value, must comply with the EC Treaty principles of non-discrimination, equal treatment, transparency, mutual recognition and proportionality.

CPD and Centres of Procurement Expertise each has in place robust and detailed procedures to ensure compliance including a Complaints

Procedure which suppliers can avail of where they believe these procedures have not been correctly applied.

Deprived Super Output Areas

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the top 100 most deprived Super Output Areas, how many (i) have a majority Catholic community background population; and (ii) have a Catholic community background population of over 90%. (AQW 4988/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Of the 100 most deprived Super Output Areas in the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure,

- (i) 72 areas have a majority Catholic community background population (2001 Census: religion or religion brought up in); and within this
- (ii) 53 areas have a Catholic community background population of 90% or more (2001 Census: religion or religion brought up in).

Capital Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if there are any major capital projects in his Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5003/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are no major capital projects in my Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service.

Small Business Rates Relief Scheme

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to update progress on the introduction of a Small Business Rates Relief Scheme; and (ii) when he expects to make an announcement on this issue.

(AQW 5035/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member will be aware of my announcement in the Assembly on 15 December 2008 when I said that I would bring forward a small business rate relief scheme. An integrated impact assessment for public consultation will be published shortly. The enabling provision for the scheme will be contained in the forthcoming Rates Amendment Bill which I hope to bring to the Executive in March. Subordinate legislation will set out the detail of the scheme. Because it requires the Assembly to pass new legislative powers, the earliest it can be in place is April 2010.

Water Charges

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what impact his decision to defer water charges for two years will have on his spending plans.

(AQW 5173/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In light of the economic downturn and the significant pressures currently facing local households it would have been unjust for the Executive to add a further financial burden at this time. In this context the Executive as a whole agreed to defer the introduction of domestic water charges.

There has been no adjustment to the Executive's spending plans for 2008-09 as a result of this decision. In terms of the coming financial year, it is intended that the additional costs falling to the Department for Regional Development will be funded from the resources which become available to the Executive as part of the 2009-10 in year monitoring process.

Fiscal Stimulus

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the fiscal stimulus offered by the Executive in comparison with initiatives being taken by other governments..

(AQW 5175/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive has few fiscal instruments at its discretion. It is therefore crucial that all available powers are used in an optimal way to support businesses and households through the current difficult economic climate. In December 2008 we announced a range of measures to help alleviate some of the economic pressures confronting the local economy. This included rate reliefs, financial assistance to fuel poor households and accelerated capital spending to assist the struggling local construction sector.

I met recently with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts to discuss the economic downturn. It was clear that our individual policy responses are very similar in nature. The key priority across our regions is to alleviate living cost pressures and boost capital spending.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

MRI Scans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the locations of the three Tesla MRI scanners.

(AQW 2808/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Guidance issued by the Health Protection Agency on the Protection of Patients and Volunteers Undergoing MRI Procedures (August 2008) indicates that there are 35 3-Tesla scanners in the UK. Detail of their location is set out in the table at Tab 1 attached.

I can assure you that a number of 3 Tesla MRI scanners are available for use by the health service.

A review of all referral requests since January 2004 has shown that no Northern Ireland children have been referred to another European Union country for a diagnosis using a Tesla scanner.

Steps will now be taken to further develop diagnostic services and I have asked the Chief Executive of the Belfast Trust to develop a business case for the introduction of a 3 Tesla scanner.

TAB 1

LOCATION OF 3-TESLA SCANNERS IN THE UK

- 1 University of Liverpool
- 2 National Society for Epilepsy Chalfont
- 3 Cheltenham Imaging Centre
- 4 University of Wales
- 5 Hope Hospital Salford
- 6 Aston University Day Hospital
- 7 Charing Cross Hospital
- 8 University of York
- 9 University of London
- 10 Cardiff University
- 11 Institute of Neurology & National Hospital for Neurology & Neurosurgery London
- 12 University of Cambridge
- 13 Paul Strickland Scanner Centre
- 14 University of Birmingham
- 15 Royal Marsden NHS Trust
- 16 University Hospitals Coventry & Warwickshire NHS Trust
- 17 Universities of Dundee & St Andrews
- 18 Newcastle University
- 19 Oxford NIHR Comprehensive Biomedical Research Centre
- 20 Singleton Hospital Swansea NHS Trust
- 21 The Oxford Clinic
- 22 Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre NHS Trust
- 23 Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust
- 24 Bangor University
- 25 University of Aberdeen
- 26 Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS Trust
- 27 University Hospital Coventry
- 28 Imperial College London
- 29 University of Manchester
- 30 Queen's Medical Centre Nottingham
- 31 Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging Glasgow
- 32 University of Nottingham
- 33 Hammersmith Hospitals NHS Trust
- 34 Hull & East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust
- 35 Hope Hospital Salford Royal NHS Trust

MRI Scans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any of the three Tesla MRI scanners are available for Health Service consultant referrals. (AQW 2809/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Guidance issued by the Health Protection Agency on the Protection of Patients and Volunteers Undergoing MRI Procedures (August 2008) indicates that there are 35 3-Tesla scanners in the UK. Detail of their location is set out in the table at Tab 1 attached.

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- 29 University of Manchester
- 30 Queen's Medical Centre Nottingham
- 31 Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging Glasgow
- 32 University of Nottingham
- 33 Hammersmith Hospitals NHS Trust
- 34 Hull & East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust
- 35 Hope Hospital Salford Royal NHS Trust

MRI Scans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any Health Service consultant has referred a child for a diagnosis using a Tesla MRI scanner, in another European Union country.

(AQW 2810/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Guidance issued by the Health Protection Agency on the Protection of Patients and Volunteers Undergoing MRI Procedures (August 2008) indicates that there are 35 3-Tesla scanners in the UK. Detail of their location is set out in the table at Tab 1 attached.

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- 34 Hull & East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust
- 35 Hope Hospital Salford Royal NHS Trust

MRI Scans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any age restrictions for patients requiring access to a 3 Tesla MRI scanner. (AQW 2892/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In August 2008 the Health Protection Agency (HPA) published advice on the Protection of Patients and Volunteers Undergoing MRI Procedures. The HPA has advised that a 3 Tesla scanner utilised in normal operating mode as referred to in the afore-mentioned guidance may be used on children. However the report acknowledges that currently very little is known about the effects of static magnetic fields in excess of a few Tesla on growth and behavioural development of fetuses and infants, suggesting some caution is warranted regarding their imaging.

Clinical judgement will inform and determine any investigations a patient should undergo.

Steps will now be taken however, to further develop diagnostic services including the introduction of a 3 Tesla MRI scanner which will be valuable in helping clinicians diagnose complex problems in both children and adults. I have asked the Chief Executive of the Belfast Trust to develop a business case for the introduction of a 3 Tesla scanner.

Ambulance Service: Complaints made against

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many complaints have been received from members of the public in relation to the Ambulance Service in 2006, 2007 and 2008, broken down by Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 4626/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Data is not captured at Board level for complaints received by the Trust but by NIAS divisional areas, which are broadly similar. The data relates to complaints received from members of the public for each of the last three years.

Year	Division	Total	Year	Division	Total	Year	Division	Total
2006	East	74	2007	East	66	2008	East	43
	North	22		North	14		North	15
	South	19		South	14		South	15
	West	13		West	12		West	10
Total 2006		128	Total 2007		106	Total 2008		83

Antrim Area Hospital

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why a transfer from Antrim Area Hospital to Braid Valley, Ballymena on 3 September 2008 took ten and a half hours; and why calls relating to this transfer were not recorded. (AQW 4627/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised that on the basis of the information provided it has not been possible to identify the hospital transfer referred to in this question. However, if the Member wishes to write to me with details of the patient's name and address, I will be happy to respond in due course.

Bank Staff: Cost of Using

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the cost of using bank staff in each Health and Social Care Trust area, in the last financial year. (AQW 4638/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the cost of bank staff is not held centrally and has been supplied by individual Health and Social Care Trusts.

HSC Trust	Cost of bank staff 07/08 (£)
Northern	3,315,756
Belfast	4,027,235
Southern*	1,528,947
South Eastern	1,833,521
Western	3,454,579
NI Ambulance	0

*Note: Does not include home/help domiciliary workers as no analysis is available

Agency Workers: Staff Covered by

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, to break down the categories of staff that were covered by agency workers in the last financial year and to provide a total cost for each category. (AQW 4639/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the use of Agency staff is published on a bi-annual basis on the departmental website at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm

Carers' Review

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Carers' Review; and when he expects to report on the review. (AQW 4687/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The joint Review of Support Services for Carers with the Department of Social Development is progressing well and I expect that the Review will be completed in the near future.

MRI Scans

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last five years, how many patients were referred for an MRI scan in the Foyle constituency; and the location of the scan. (AQW 4714/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of patients referred for an MRI scan from the Foyle parliamentary constituency area, and the location of the scan, in each of the last five years, is not collected centrally by the Department. Provision of this information by Health and Social Care Trusts would incur a disproportionate cost.

Arthritis Sufferers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to confirm whether his Department promotes a good practice matrix as part of its standardised strategy to guide GPs when referring arthritis sufferers to specific medical specialists for treatment; and (ii) how his Department measures the effectiveness of treatment for arthritis sufferers and ensures that services are co-ordinated to minimise repeat treatments and to link them for increased effectiveness. (AQW 4718/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The term 'good practice matrix', in this context, is not a recognised term within primary or secondary care. However, the Department is implementing a comprehensive Elective Access Protocol to ensure the consistent and effective administration of planned patients within the secondary care (hospital)

environment. As part of this work the Department has been working with GPs to develop standardised referral pro formas for a range of conditions, including arthritis.

- (ii) Monitoring of care is usually carried out by combination of hospital and (increasingly) primary care. It is focused on monitoring the efficacy and side-effects of disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs. Protocols, agreed with GPs, are put in place for all patients, involving as appropriate occupational therapists and specialist Nurses.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4761/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

Department and Agency

- (i) Guidance has been issued to all staff concerning the new commitment to paying businesses within 10 days. The statistics for the December Prompt Payment for DHSSPS are:

Organisation	% invoices paid in 10 days
DHSSPS	62

HSC Bodies

- (ii) Guidance has also been issued to all Health and Social Care bodies concerning the new commitment to paying businesses within 10 days subject to receipt of goods and or invoice. Information is not available on the performance of these bodies against the 10 day prompt payment pledge.

Cardiac Arrests

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what each Health and Social Care Trust is doing to address the poor survival rate of patients following out of hospital cardiac arrests. (AQW 4775/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is acknowledged that out of hospital cardiac arrest (OHCA) is a serious and life threatening event with low rates of survival. The survival rates of OHCA patients have remained poor and of the order of 5-10% throughout Western Europe for many years. Statistics indicate that the Northern Ireland rate of survival for OHCA is broadly comparable with the rest of the UK and Europe.

Studies have suggested that there is a correlation between survival rates for out of hospital cardiac arrest and ambulance response times; therefore NIAS is the HSC Trust in the lead in addressing this issue regionally.

I have set a challenging target for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to respond to 70% of Category A (life-threatening) emergency calls within eight minutes. I believe that progress in achieving this target has the potential to improve the survival rate for OHCA in Northern Ireland.

All NIAS emergency vehicles are equipped with cardiac defibrillator monitors and ambulance paramedics are trained in advanced life support and can give a range of drugs and use a number of advanced techniques for the management of OHCA. NIAS are also engaged in a process of updating cardiac monitors so as to incorporate the most up to date technology compliant with current clinical guidelines.

In addition NIAS is also facilitating the development of community first responder schemes which it is hoped will further improve the response to this type of medical emergency.

Clinical Physiologists

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many clinical physiologists currently practice. (AQW 4776/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of Clinical Physiologists working within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts is given in the table below.

Table 1: Number of Clinical Physiologists in Northern Ireland Health and Social Care as at February 2009.

Trust	Clinical Physiologists	
	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	54	50.65
Northern	30	26.63
South Eastern	15	14.29
Southern	41	37.57
Western	21	20.09
Total	161	149.23

Source: NI Health & Social Care Trusts

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
2. Figures include staff at Pay Band 5 and above.
3. Belfast Trust are currently in the process of recruiting 4 Full-time Cardiac Clinical Physiologists (2 new posts and 2 replacement posts).

Clinical Physiologists

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if an assessment has been made of the impact on patient safety caused by the lack of statutory regulation of clinical physiologists. (AQW 4777/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of a patient safety impact assessment having been carried out for this group of health professionals.

The statutory regulation of clinical physiologists, like most healthcare professionals, will be on a UK-wide basis.

I understand that the Department of Health in England has undertaken to provide a timeline to the Registration Council for Clinical Physiologists (RCCP) for the development of UK-wide legislation to bring about statutory regulation for clinical physiologists.

Regional Public Education Programme

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any plans for a regional public education programme to teach lay members emergency life support skills. (AQW 4778/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has no plans for a regional public education programme to teach lay members emergency life support skills.

There are a number of bodies in Northern Ireland that teach emergency life support skills in accordance with national guidance as advised by the UK Resuscitation Council. The Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety is working with these groups to ensure a co-ordinated approach is adopted with regards training in emergency life support skills within community, sports and school settings.

Direct Payments

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services a recipient of Direct Payments can purchase with the monies allocated to them. (AQW 4790/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Direct Payments are made in lieu of social service provisions to individuals who have been assessed as needing personal social services and for whom a Trust has decided to provide those services. Direct Payments can be used to purchase a wide range of services,

including training, where those services meet the client's assessed needs. These services include, for example, personal assistant support, social care equipment and adaptations, short stays in residential accommodation for the recipient and further education/training. In addition, Direct Payments can be made to carers to provide services such as, short holiday breaks, the purchase of mobile phones and driving lessons to help them in their caring role.

Direct Payments

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if a recipient of Direct Payments can use the monies allocated to them to purchase a place on a training scheme operated by a social economy project. (AQW 4791/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Direct Payments are made in lieu of social service provisions to individuals who have been assessed as needing personal social services and for whom a Trust has decided to provide those services. Direct Payments can be used to purchase a wide range of services, including training, where those services meet the client's assessed needs. These services include, for example, personal assistant support, social care equipment and adaptations, short stays in residential accommodation for the recipient and further education/training. In addition, Direct Payments can be made to carers to provide services such as, short holiday breaks, the purchase of mobile phones and driving lessons to help them in their caring role.

Hospital Staff: Attacks Against

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the latest figures on attacks against hospital staff. (AQW 4811/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Violent attacks against healthcare staff have been formally monitored by my Department since April 2004 and are recorded on a 6 monthly basis. The figures provided in the table below detail the latest recorded number of physical and verbal attacks on hospital staff in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Location: Health and Social Care Trust Area	Number of Physical Attacks reported on hospital Staff for the period 1 April 2008 – 30 September 2008	
	Verbal	Physical
Belfast HSC Trust	295	688
Northern HSC Trust	147	491
Southern HSC Trust	152	268
Western HSC Trust	185	366
South Eastern HSC Trust	31	81
Total	810	1,894

Hoax Emergency Calls

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the latest figures on hoax emergency calls. (AQW 4812/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There were 3819 false alarms and malicious calls recorded by the Fire and Rescue Service during 2008. This represents a decrease of 20% over the 2 year period from 2006.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service recorded 3815 calls of this nature in 2008. This represents a decrease of almost 40% over the 2 year period from 2006.

Foreign Nurses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any of the Health and Social Care Trusts have any plans to employ foreign nurses. (AQW 4868/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Care Trusts have advised me that there are no plans to undertake targeted overseas recruitment. Appointments are made on the basis of merit.

Non-EU nurses may apply for externally advertised posts and if successful, appointment would be dependant on securing a work permit prior to taking up employment.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the directors and their departments in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4872/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The details requested are available on the Trust's internet site at www.southeasterntrust.hscni.net.

Craigavon Hospital

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times have midwives from other hospitals been transferred to Craigavon Hospital to cover vacancies on a (i) planned; or (ii) emergency basis. (AQW 5045/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Trust advises that midwives from other hospitals outside the Southern Trust area have never been transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital to cover vacant posts on a planned or emergency basis.

On 2 occasions in December 2008, 2 shifts were covered by a midwife from Daisy Hill Hospital.

In addition, bank and agency midwives are employed on a needs basis to deal with staffing pressures brought about by sickness absence and maternity leave.

The Southern Trust confirms that at all times their priority is the safety and well-being of mothers and babies.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the cost of redundancies was, which resulted from re-organisation under the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 5092/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of RPA related voluntary redundancy in Health and Social Care to date is £13.5m; this process is continuing.

Nursing Staff

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing staff in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, will not have their contracts renewed. (AQW 5099/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 320 nursing staff working in the Western Health and Social Care Trust on short-term contracts. Information on whether these contracts will be renewed is not held and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Nursing Staff

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing staff in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, are working on short term contracts. (AQW 5100/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 320 nursing staff working in the Western Health and Social Care Trust on short-term contracts. Information on whether these contracts will be renewed is not held and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Social Security Benefits

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to allow those in receipt of the required Social Security Benefits to claim travel expenses while attending a medical centre.
(AQW 5111/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The current arrangements already enable patients who are in receipt of certain Social Security benefits, or on low income, to apply for assistance with their travel expenses in attending a hospital, other establishment managed by a Trust or any other place in the United Kingdom for the provision of any services (except primary medical or primary dental services) under the care of a consultant.

As these provisions meet the needs of the majority of people I have no plans to extend the provisions of the Regulations.

Agency Staff

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total spend by his Department on agency staff from outside Northern Ireland, through agencies based elsewhere in the United Kingdom, broken down by (i) salary; (ii) accommodation costs; (iii) travel costs; and (iv) other associated cost, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 5182/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not held centrally and records are not kept in this format at Trust level.

Information on the use of Agency staff is published on a bi-annual basis on the departmental website at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm

Mullinure Hospital in Armagh

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times patients at Mullinure Hospital in Armagh were held up for i) 1, ii) 2, iii) 3, and iv) 4 days because of the unavailability of an ambulance to transport them to Armagh Community Hospital for diagnostic procedures, in each of the last four calendar years.
(AQW 5225/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Data regarding transfer times prior to November 2008 is not available.

For information relating to the last 3 months I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW 4422/09.

Termination of Pregnancy

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will publish guidelines on the termination of pregnancy.
(AQW 5277/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently seeking Executive approval of the Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy. I hope to publish the Guidance as soon as possible thereafter.

Ardavon Park Complex

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the washing machine in the communal area of the Ardavon Park complex in North Belfast will be repaired by the Belfast Health and Social Services Trust.
(AQW 5281/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The Belfast Trust has advised that rather than replacing the communal laundry facilities at the Ardavon Park Complex, they believe it is more appropriate to assess and find solutions to individual laundry service needs.

The Trust is in discussion with residents about this and is seeking a local resolution which will be progressed over the next two weeks. They have advised that they will continue to involve the member in further discussions regarding this issue.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**Road Service Car Parks**

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment on the safety and security of Road Service car parks. (AQW 4727/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): NCP Services Ltd (NSL) is contracted by my Department's Roads Service to provide safe and reliable parking and enforcement services. This includes the management of Roads Service's 127 off-street charged car parks.

Roads Service has advised that NSL car park attendants routinely conduct an inspection of the car parks at the beginning of each shift. Any issues relating to Health and Safety, or general cleanliness, are escalated to their Team Leaders for prompt action. In addition, NSL conduct full quarterly Health and Safety inspections of all car parks to ensure that any safety and security risks are highlighted and dealt with accordingly.

Roads Service endeavours to ensure that all car parks are signed appropriately and that all car parking equipment, used for the provision of the service, is electrically safe and maintained in accordance with the manufacturer's guidelines. Moving barrier equipment is signed to identify potential hazards to members of the public. In addition, at least one ticket machine in every car park is compliant with The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Regulations.

NSL is also responsible for providing quarterly vegetation management in off-street charged car parks, and for routinely cleaning car parks and carrying out any pest control required. NSL reports car park surface and structural defects to Roads Service on a monthly basis.

NSL implements its own welfare policies to ensure the safety and security of all its staff associated with the provision of car park management services for Roads Service.

Road Service Car Parks

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development how many reported incidents of theft, vandalism and other related events have taken place in Roads Service car parks, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4732/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Since 30 October 2006, NCP Services Ltd (NSL) has been contracted by my Department's Roads Service to provide the operation of parking and enforcement services. This includes the management of Roads Service's 127 off-street charged car parks.

NSL maintains a register of all incidents relating to theft, vandalism and other events that have been reported by staff or members of the public. The numbers of incidents recorded each year, since the start of the contract, are as follows:-

- 30 October 06 - 31 December 06 — no incidents recorded
- 01 January 07 - 31 December 07 — 17 incidents recorded
- 01 January 08 - 31 December 08 — 75 incidents recorded
- 01 January 09 - 06 February 09 — 11 incidents recorded

Roads Service does not hold complete records of incidents in its off-street charged or free car parks, prior to 30 October 2006. However, the number of incidents that have been recorded are as follows:-

- 1 January 2006 – 30 October 2006 — 22 incidents recorded

- 1 January 2005 – 31 December 2005 — 62 incidents recorded
- 1 January 2004 – 31 December 2004 — 109 incidents recorded

Road Service Car Parks

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development has his Department given any consideration to implementing security measures at Roads Service car parks similar to that of the 'Parksafe' car park in Bold Lane, Derby. (AQW 4739/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is not aware of the security measures in place at the 'Parksafe' car park in Bold Lane, Derry. However, I can confirm that my Department's Roads Service has recently implemented security measures at its Town Centre multi-storey car park in Ballymena. This car park had been subject to an escalation in incidents of vandalism, including extensive graffiti and various other forms of anti-social behaviour, the majority of which took place in the stairwells and lift cars.

The security measures implemented included the introduction of a CCTV system, which not only provides a suitable deterrent for potential vandals, but also significantly improves customer safety. In addition, the existing gates and fencing were upgraded to prevent access to the multi-storey portion of the car park outside operational times, when the majority of vandalism and anti-social behaviour took place.

Roads Service has advised that these security measures have proved to be very successful, with the occurrences of vandalism significantly reduced since their implementation.

There have been no specific trends of vandalism, theft or associated incidents in other Roads Service charged car parks that would justify implementing such widespread security measures as in Town Centres multi-storey car park. However, Roads Service, in conjunction with NCP

Services Ltd (NSL), monitor all recorded incidents and consider any suitable mitigating measures that may be required.

Newcastle: Traffic Assessment

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will authorise a traffic assessment in Newcastle, County Down to obtain data on the number of vehicles using the roads in this area throughout the year. (AQW 4754/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has permanent traffic counters, which are installed on the strategic and trunk road network, to collect data, to determine the annual traffic volume at particular sites.

Roads Service considers that the installation of such traffic counters, on all or any of the roads in the Newcastle area, would be cost prohibitive.

However, I can advise that Roads Service are currently awaiting the results from temporary traffic counters recently installed at Dundrum Road, on the approach to Railway Street and at Donard Street. I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager, Mr Bertie Ellison, to write to you when the results of these assessments become available.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department and all its agencies and bodies operating, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4762/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department has taken steps to advise its staff on the revised 10 day prompt payment pledge. The Senior Finance Director of the Department wrote to all DRD non industrial staff on 1 December 2008 advising on measures to be taken to achieve the revised target and asking all staff to take steps, where possible, to ensure that all of the Department's creditors are paid as quickly as possible. The Directors of Finance, in December 2008, also wrote to Finance Officers and Business Units drawing attention to the revised 10 day target and asked that all appropriate steps be taken to facilitate compliance with it. The Department measures its invoice payment performance and provides feedback to managers on a monthly basis.

With regard to the Department's arm's length bodies, the position is as follows. Translink has confirmed that it has changed its system creditor terms to comply with the 10 day target. The Department is currently discussing with Northern Ireland Water the implementation of the 10 day target.

Speed Limit Signage

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with his counterparts in the UK Government and the Republic of Ireland about having speed limit signage displaying both miles and kilometres in each jurisdiction. (AQW 4808/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have had no discussions with my counterparts in Britain or in the South, about having speed limit signage displaying both miles and kilometres in each jurisdiction, thus far.

The legislative position with regard to the metrication of road signs is articulated within 'The Units of Measurement Regulations 1995', and is currently a reserved matter, and as a consequence, does not give me the powers to make such a change currently.

Programme for Government Targets

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development what risk assessment he has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4829/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Programme for Government 2008-11 contains 23 Public Service Agreements (PSAs), four of which contain objectives and targets for my Department.

Each year, my Department develops a Business Plan containing in-year targets that contribute towards the overall achievement of the PSA targets. As part of this process, my Department identifies risks to the achievement of the Business Plan targets. Those risks are assessed and formally monitored by the Departmental Board twice a year.

The Departmental Board also receive a quarterly performance update on all PSA and Business Plan targets as well as a progress report on the management of their associated risks.

Castle Park Avenue, Bangor: Re-Planting Trees

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department intends to re-plant trees at Castle Park Avenue, Bangor, following road repairs. (AQW 4869/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the original trees along Castle Park Avenue, Bangor were removed to:

- enhance pedestrian safety by improving visibility of pedestrians, especially the many school children, who use this road;
- enable the safe passage of double-decker buses and other Heavy Goods Vehicles;
- remove tripping hazards that the exposed roots systems of the existing trees created; and
- assist the installation of a new kerblin for the recently resurfaced carriageway.

Roads Service has no plans to plant replacement trees along Castle Park Avenue. However, prior to removal of the trees, Roads Service consulted with North Down Borough Council on this issue and offered to plant replacement trees at another suitable location.

Craignantlet Hills: Road Safety

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to improve road safety in the Craignantlet hills area. (AQW 4870/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has commenced a route improvement study of the B170 Ballymiscaw Road/Craignantlet Road/Ballysallagh Road. The study aims to identify schemes

that will improve the safety and efficiency of the route. This study will include analysis of the traffic flows, both current and projected, as well as collision history.

As part of this work, Roads Service is currently investigating a potential large scale Minor Works scheme to provide new roundabouts at the junction of the B170 Craignantlet Road/ Dunlady Road/Hollywood Road at Craignantlet Crossroads, and also at the nearby junction of Ballymiscaw Road/Whinney Hill. This scheme is at an early stage of development, and programming will depend on the scale and cost of the required work as well as the availability of the necessary land and funding.

I should advise that to help identify sites where engineering measures could make a positive contribution to road safety, Roads Service receives from the PSNI reports of all road traffic collisions that cause personal injury. However, there is currently no location on Craignantlet Road being considered for inclusion in a collision remedial programme.

I can also advise that, within this vicinity, Roads Service has recently completed the provision of approximately 100 metres of new safety barrier at the bend opposite No 51 Ballysallagh Road, Bangor. In addition, new chevron signs and marker posts have also recently been provided at the bend near No 92 Ballymiscaw Road.

Ballywhisken: Road Safety

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to improve road safety in and around the hamlet of Ballywhisken, and if so, what measures he intends to take. (AQW 4882/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Traffic calming measures were introduced in Ballywhisken some years ago.

A recent inspection by my Department's Roads Service has revealed that the original enhanced speed limit signs have become faded, therefore, Roads Service is currently arranging for these signs to be replaced and erected on high visibility backing boards.

There are no plans to introduce any further measures in Ballywhisken at this time.

Departmental Staff Numbers

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Civil Service staff employed by his Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4906/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The attached tables provide the information requested.

Civil Service Staff						
Grade (and analogous)	Staff Numbers at May 2007			Staff Numbers at January 2009		
	DRD Core	Roads	Total	DRD Core	Roads	Total
Senior Civil Service (Grade 5 and above)	9	7	16	10	6	16
Grade 6	7	7	14	6	9	15
Grade 7	27	44	71	32	53	85
Deputy Principal	64	155	219	67	157	224
Staff Officer	83	265	348	79	280	359
Executive Officer 1	67	447	514	48	427	475
Executive Officer 2	96	84	180	69	83	152
Administrative Officer	115	241	356	96	218	314
Administrative Assistant	52	361	413	28	337	365
Industrial	2	645	647	1	612	613
Total	522	2,256	2,778	436	2,182	2,618

Agency Workers						
Category	Numbers at May 2007			Numbers at January 2009		
	DRD Core	Roads	Total	DRD Core	Roads	Total
Administrative	1	30	31	2	46	48
Professional/Technical		8	8		7	7
Support	1	5	6	1	10	11
Industrial		7	7		3	3
Total	2	50	52	3	66	69

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2701/09, what involvement (i) he; and (ii) the CEO of Translink has in negotiating and approving these agreements. (AQW 4933/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have no direct involvement in the negotiation and approval of these arrangements. NITHC operates commercially under the Transport Act (NI) 1967. The Management Statement and Financial Memorandum agreed between NITHC and my department defines operational roles and responsibilities.

The NITHC Board is formally responsible for agreement of all contracts entered into by NITHC and will delegate day to day operational issues to executives.

Strangford Ferry Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if effective signage in relation to the Strangford ferry service will be installed in Newtownards to provide sailing time information to travellers. (AQW 4937/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a variable message sign is to be re-installed on the Portaferry Road, Newtownards. However, this sign is only for the purpose of providing information of any service unavailability.

The timetable, listing sailing times, is available in information leaflets, on the Roads Service website - www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/strangfordferry.htm, at the ferry point, or by phoning the ferry terminal.

A5/N2 Dualling Project

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development in relation to the A5/N2 dualling project, (i) what progress has been made; (ii) what are the next stages of the project; and (iii) what is the estimated date for completion. (AQW 4958/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The first key milestone for the A5 dualling project was achieved ahead of target when the scheme's preferred corridor was announced in November 2008. Since then, my Department's Roads Service has been developing route options within that corridor.

Route options will be presented for consultation during a series of public information events, arranged during February 2009, to advise interested parties of the current position and to invite comments on the route options. The public feedback received from these events will allow Roads Service to comprehensively explore all possible routes before the realisation of the second key milestone, to identify a preferred route option within the preferred corridor, by the summer 2009.

It is hoped that construction of this scheme will commence in 2012 with completion in 2015. However, this will be subject to:

- satisfactory progress through the statutory processes;
- economic appraisal;

- the availability of funding through the normal budgetary process; and
- satisfactory progression through the procurement process.

Gritting Roads

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development for the average daily cost of gritting roads.
(AQW 4983/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the cost for a single application of salt, to the North's entire winter gritting schedule, is some £73,500.

This figure is based on the 2007/2008 winter service season, the latest year for which figures are available.

East Antrim: Gritting Services

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware that another school bus has crashed on rural ungritted roads in East Antrim; and what plans he has to carry out a detailed assessment to establish the cost and benefits of extending gritting services to include all Translink operated bus routes that provide a service for children traveling to and from school.
(AQW 5014/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware of an incident involving a school bus on the Shanksbridge Road between Ballyclare and Ballymena, on 5 February 2009.

I can also advise that the salting of school bus routes was considered in the 2001 review of my Department's Winter Service policy and procedures. One of the key outcomes of that review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, should continue.

The review also estimated that to include all school bus routes within the Department's gritting schedule, would more than double the annual cost of our salting operation. In addition to a substantial capital investment in new vehicles, it would cost some £4.5-7.0 million extra every year.

Nevertheless, the review recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. A 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles, for the purpose identifying qualifying routes. Also as a result of the review, road links to small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more are now salted.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even further funds into salting and increasing funding for other activities, such as road maintenance, or Roads Service's collision remedial works programme. You may be interested to note that the latter resulted in reducing the total number of target collisions in 2006/07 by 68%, while increased investment in road maintenance would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces throughout the whole of the year.

I have no plans to carry out a further review of my Department's Winter Service policy, as there has been no significant change in circumstances since the completion of the 2001 review. However, I can advise that officials are currently examining the operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the nature of complaints lodged by Northern Ireland Water staff through internal grievance procedures against management, broken down by each Water Service office/depot, in the last three years.
(AQW 5043/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that information relating to formal grievance proceedings initiated by its employees was not recorded centrally until 1 May 2007 and can therefore only be provided from that date. Since then, 34 formal grievances have been received covering a wide range of issues and these are listed in Table A below. In the timescale available, Northern Ireland Water is unable to provide a breakdown of the nature of grievances across its offices, but the total number of grievances received from each office is set out in Table B.

TABLE A

Nature of grievances	Number
Restructuring	5
Pay and Grading	7
Recruitment	5
Career Break	1
Transfers	4
Alleged Discrimination	2
Issue with Manager	1
Communications	4
Maladministration	1
Privacy	1
Attendance on courses	1
Disciplinary	1
Unknown as of date of response	1

TABLE B

NI Water Office / Location	Number of Grievances
Academy – Ballymena	1
Armagh	1
Ballykeel	2
Bretland – Belfast	2
Castor Bay – Craigavon	1
College Street - Belfast	3
Conlig – Ards	2
Craigavon	2
Dorisland – Carrick	1
Downpatrick	1
Enniskillen	3
Northland – Belfast	1
Omagh	2
Seagoe – Craigavon	2
Westland	8
No fixed location	2

Construction Industry

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans for projects that would help create jobs in the construction industry. (AQW 5059/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my recent reply to Oral Assembly Question AQO 1956/09, in which I provided information on the number of construction projects and maintenance works provided to the construction industry.

Duneaney Road from Glarryford to Rasharkin

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister for Regional Development in relation to the Duneaney Road from Glarryford to Rasharkin if (i) there have been accidents involving vehicles, specifically buses carrying school children; (ii) the road has been gritted to date; and (iii) there will be provision for gritting in the future. (AQW 5132/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Northern Ireland Office has advised that the PSNI only maintain records on injury collisions. The PSNI has confirmed that, from 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2008, there were no injury collisions reported to the PSNI that involved vehicles carrying school children on the Duneaney Road, from Glarryford to Rasharkin. The statistics for January 2009 are not, as yet, available.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Duneaney Road is not on the salting schedule, as it does not meet the current criteria, and there are no plans to extend the salted network to include it. However, it has been gritted on occasions, such as recently, when there were extreme wintry conditions. I can further advise that Roads Service provides salt piles on the road, at appropriate locations, for use by the public on a self help basis.

With regard to extending the salted network, as you are probably aware, a review of the winter service policy and procedures operated by Roads Service was carried out in 2001. One of the key outcomes of the review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service, on the busier main through routes, should continue.

Roads Service is fully committed to playing its part in reducing the number of deaths and injuries on our roads. However, PSNI statistics, at the time of the review, showed that frost, ice and snow were a factor in only 2.4% of all road injury accidents, and less than 1% occur on roads outside the normal salted road network. Extending the salted network is not the best way of achieving a reduction in road casualties.

Roads Service considers that it would be better to spend more resources on funding for road maintenance, which would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces, throughout the whole of the year, or by increasing the allocation for the accident remedial and traffic calming programmes, which have a proven track record of cutting accidents by 40%.

While I understand and appreciate both you and your constituents' concerns for those who use the remaining more lightly trafficked roads, which are not on the salted network, it simply is not practical to salt all roads. The North is already top of the league, compared to other regions across these isles, in terms of the length of road salted per head of population, and there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even more funds into salting, or into the many other worthwhile demands on Roads Service's limited resources, many of which are also safety related.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development how much money her Department has made available to (i) the Ulster Scots Agency; and (ii) Ulster Scots projects, in each of the last two years. (AQW 4757/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): My Department does not fund the Ulster Scots Agency and has not incurred any expenditure in relation to Ulster Scots projects in the last two years.

North Down Borough Council Area: Housing Benefit Applications

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, how long on average does it take to process housing benefit applications in the North Down Borough Council area. (AQW 4768/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Within the administrative area covered by the Housing Executive's Bangor District Office, an average of 78% of new Housing Benefit claims were assessed within 14 days of all information being received for the period April to December 2008.

Employment Support Allowance

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of customer calls go unanswered, on a monthly basis, since Employment Support Allowance commenced. (AQW 4818/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In line with the position in Great Britain, the call volumes for ESA in Northern Ireland are more than twice those anticipated at the initial planning stage. The percentage of unanswered calls rose rapidly in December and January. An additional 18 staff were recruited and trained in January. The staff are now in post and this has had an immediate impact on the percentage of unanswered calls. The table below provides details of the unanswered calls each month.

PERCENTAGE OF UNANSWERED CALLS

Month	Percentage of Unanswered Calls
October	1.2
November	4.0
December	38.9
January	54.6
February*	21.2

* Latest information available at close of business on 13 February 2009

Management and staff have responded well to the high level of interest in the new telephony based service by handling over 31,000 calls since ESA was introduced on 27 October 2008. It is expected that performance will continue to improve as the new staff gain experience.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4842/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development (including its sponsored bodies) is currently achieving 80% clearance within 10 days for all payments and is striving to achieve 100% as soon as possible.

Social Security Agency

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development if she will consider the concerns of Social Security Agency staff about the proposals in the SSA Strategic Business Review and if she will withdraw these proposals. (AQW 4875/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Social Security staff have had the opportunity to raise any concerns about the proposals during the first stage of public consultation and these will now be considered fully as part of the second stage i.e. the completion and issue of an Equality Impact Assessment.

The proposals will not be withdrawn as I believe it would be wrong to deny all stakeholders and the public the opportunity to have their say.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development when the extra £150 winter fuel payment will start to be issued. (AQW 4877/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Financial Assistance Bill was given royal assent on 4 February. The Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdfM) will now designate a department to deliver a Household Fuel Payment. I am unable to confirm precisely when the Household Fuel Payment will be made, as there are still a number of key decisions to be made around how it will be processed. Those decisions will not

be made until the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister has designated a department to deliver the payment. It is likely, of course, that the designated department will be the Department for Social Development.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding has the Citizens Advice Bureau received from her Department in each of the last five years; and if funding will be increased due to the current economic conditions. (AQW 4889/09)

The Minister for Social Development: DSD funding allocated to Citizens Advice Bureaux including the Regional Office and Local Bureaux for 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 totals £9,701,299.76. This has been detailed in an excel spreadsheet with data table notes and placed in the Assembly Library.

DSD funding for local voluntary advice is distributed to local Councils through the Community Support Programme. Local Councils then allocate funding to voluntary advice providers within their area. During 2007/08 and 2008/09 I ensured an additional £1 million was ring fenced specifically for voluntary advice within the Community Support Programme budget.

At present I am taking forward “Opening Doors” The Strategy for the Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community. It sets out a plan for the future of voluntary advice within Northern Ireland focussing on the best use of available resources and will ensure that high quality advice services are delivered to those who need them most.

In addition Citizens Advice has been involved in the delivery of the Social Security Agency’s Benefit Uptake Programme since 2006. To date £554,282.15 has been paid to Citizens Advice Regional Headquarters with further payments likely to be made in May 2009.

In January I also announced plans to recruit 150 new staff to the Social Security Agency frontline. This is a direct result of the economic downturn, with many more people claiming benefits. Most of the new staff will be posted to the front line Jobs & Benefits Offices with some working in the new Employment & Support Allowance Centre. This is a proactive response to the current difficult economic situation. By recruiting extra staff into the front line, we will ensure customers continue to receive the best possible service.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many meetings she has had with each of the three MEPs from 2007 to date. (AQW 4895/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have met each of Northern Ireland’s MEPs, in their official capacity, once since 2007.

Social Housing: Castle Street Area

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development if property developments in the Castle Street area will have any provision for social housing; and if these developments are subject to Article 40 agreements. (AQW 4922/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department’s draft masterplan for the West Side Regeneration District, which includes the Castle Street area, highlights the potential to provide 322 residential units in the study area, 20% of which have been designated as affordable residential units, including social housing. DSD does not have the statutory authority to use Article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 to enter into planning agreements.

Social Security Offices

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development whether the 150 additional posts, that were announced to fill front line services in Social Security offices, are part of the 300 current vacancies or additional vacancies. (AQW 4923/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The 150 posts announced are new front line posts for the Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) within the Social Security Agency network of Jobs & Benefits and Social Security Offices. The Agency's pool of vacancies cover all areas of its work, of which JSA is one element. These new posts to the JSA front line will enable the Social Security Agency to address the significant increase in Jobseekers Allowance claims arising as a result of the economic downturn and have been facilitated by the reprioritisation of existing resources across all areas of the Agency's business.

Social Housing Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list all the social housing projects scheduled for the Strangford constituency in the next two financial years and to the total value of each investment. (AQW 4943/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The new 5 year Social Housing Development Programme listing the social housing projects for Northern Ireland for 2009/10 – 2013/14 is currently being formulated and, pending appropriate approvals by my Department, will be published on the Housing Executive's website at www.nihe.gov.uk. The Housing Executive will of course provide details of the relevant schemes when the Programme is available and approved by my Department.

Strangford: Social Housing Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list all the social housing projects currently under way in the Strangford constituency and the total value of each investment. (AQW 4944/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are currently sixteen social housing projects underway in the Strangford Constituency as follows:-

- 1 general needs housing unit at 4 Inisharoon Court, Newtownards *
- 40 general needs housing units at 31-35 Donaghadee Road, Newtownards *
- 20 Category 1 Elderly units Church Street, Newtownards *
- General maintenance Woodstock/Willowbrook windows - £374,000
- External cyclical maintenance Bowtown Phase 1 - £218,000
- External cyclical maintenance Ballybeen Phases 6, 7 and 8 - £690,000
- Revenue replacement kitchens Greyabbey/Kircubbin - £126,000
- Revenue replacement kitchens Scrabo - £894,000
- Multi element improvement Westwinds Phase 3 - £1,626,000
- Multi element improvement Main Street, Islandview - £220,000
- Multi element improvement Ballybeen Phase 4 - £2,225,000
- Environmental improvement Bowtown Phase 1 - £853,000
- Heating replacement Movilla - £247,000
- NIHE area wide heating replacement scheme - £146,000
- Heating replacement Movilla Phase 2 - £430,000
- Estate infrastructure Rectory Road parking - £264,000

* For reasons of commercial sensitivity the Housing Executive does not release individual scheme costs with regard to the Social Housing Development programme.

Dunclug: Environmental Improvement Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when Fallon Construction will be given permission to begin work on the Environmental Improvement Scheme in Dunclug in Ballymena. (AQW 4984/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Faloon Construction has been awarded the contract for the Environmental Improvement Scheme in Dunclug, Ballymena. An Economic Appraisal is currently under consideration and

once the scheme has been formally approved and resources identified to take forward the agreed works Fallow Construction will be given permission to begin.

Dunclug Action Plan

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to list each deadline that has been missed in the Dunclug Action Plan and when this work will be completed. (AQW 4985/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Two of the 22 actions within the Dunclug Action Plan have not yet started; the relocation of the play park and the implementation of a NIHE estate strategy. Planning permission has been sought for the play park and subject to this being granted, it is anticipated that work will commence on site in spring 2009. An Economic Appraisal for the NIHE estate strategy is currently being considered by Department of Finance and Personnel as the scheme is above the Housing Executive's delegated limit. The start date will depend on when clearance from the Department of Finance and Personnel is secured and the availability of the necessary funding.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on winter fuel credit payments for pensioners. (AQW 4990/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Financial Assistance Bill was given royal assent on 4 February. The Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdfM) will now designate a department to deliver a Household Fuel Payment. I am unable to confirm precisely when the Household Fuel Payment will be made, as there are still a number of key decisions to be made around how it will be processed. Those decisions will not be made until the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister has designated a department to deliver the payment. It is likely, of course, that the designated department will be the Department for Social Development.

Capital Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development if there are any major capital projects in her Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5005/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department's Housing budget has been under pressure throughout the 2008-09 financial year because of the virtual collapse of house and land sales and increased volumes in revenue programmes. The resultant shortfall in funding regrettably means that a number of schemes within the remainder of this year's programme of improvement schemes are being held back to next year. If funding becomes available in the February Monitoring Round, the Housing Executive plans to release a number of schemes for new social housing, as well as contracts for major improvements to Housing Executive properties before the end of March 2009.

Eight Comprehensive Development projects (where contracts have been awarded by the Department following "developers' brief" competitions) are being affected by the current financial climate. Preferred developers are experiencing difficulties in obtaining the bank funding to carry out the developments. In some cases other factors are also contributing to the delay.

In five Urban Development Grant projects, developers are also having difficulties in obtaining funding from the banks to finance their schemes. All have accepted grant offers and are trying to secure funds from other sources, but so far without much success.

On the Planning issue, two developers have claimed that the backlog in planning applications has hindered the commencement of their developments. Similarly, the start date of one Regional Development project has been held up due to delays in securing planning permission.

Seymour Hill: Dales Flats

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to estimate the timescale for the £5 million multi-element scheme of improvements in the Dales Flats in Seymour Hill. (AQW 5027/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The economic appraisal for the Housing Executive improvement scheme for Dales Flats is currently being considered by the Department. If approval is given, the Housing Executive could proceed immediately with advertising/tendering for the scheme. However, due to the high cost, the Housing Executive will advertise in the 'Official Journal of the European Union'. This process usually takes approximately 6 months, with a further 2 months for preparation of tender report and subsequent tender approval. The scheme will last for approximately 30 months.

Volunteer Bureau Initiative Budget

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give assurances that no decisions will be made about the Volunteer Bureau Initiative budget and the local volunteering infrastructure post March 2010, until she has considered the proposal from the centres opposed to option B. (AQW 5036/09)

The Minister for Social Development: No decision has been taken on the shape of any future volunteering infrastructure. The findings from the forthcoming consultation on the volunteering strategy will determine the interventions needed to implement the strategy. In turn these interventions will help determine the type of infrastructure that is needed. The consultation document on the volunteering strategy will have a full public consultation.

Local Volunteering Infrastructure

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the adequacy of a centralised model for the local volunteering infrastructure to meet the needs of the community/voluntary sector as it takes away decision making from local people best placed to service those needs. (AQW 5037/09)

The Minister for Social Development: No decision has been taken on the shape of any future volunteering infrastructure. The findings from the forthcoming consultation on the volunteering strategy will determine the interventions needed to implement the strategy. In turn these interventions will help determine the type of infrastructure that is needed. Assessment of the adequacy of any models will be made at that time. The consultation document on the volunteering strategy will have a full public consultation.

Draft Volunteering Strategy

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the draft volunteering strategy. (AQW 5038/09)

The Minister for Social Development: We have a vibrant voluntary sector and a strong and active volunteer base. Volunteers are the lifeblood of our communities and the binding force in our community life. For the first time Northern Ireland will have a Volunteering Strategy to support the hundreds of thousands of people who freely give their time to help others. I hope it succeeds in encouraging more people to become volunteers, enriching their own lives as well as the lives of those they are helping.

The Strategy will focus on making it easier for everyone to become involved and have a more rewarding volunteering experience. It will recognise the value and the benefits of volunteering for individuals and society. It will support and strengthen the infrastructure that supports volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

Officials will be taking a consultation document to the Social Development Committee on 26 February. I will then take the consultation document to the Executive. I hope the Executive will endorse the consultation document for what is a very important strategy which has the potential to have a very positive impact on the volunteers and people of Northern Ireland. I hope to publish the consultation document in May. There will be a full public consultation and a series of consultation events across the country.

Social Security Agency

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answers to AQW 3024/09 and AQW 3025/09, why there is a discrepancy between her claim of a reduction of staff by 495 and the Social Security Agency's claim of a reduction of 200, if the SSA Strategic business Review Proposals were implemented. (AQW 5039/09)

The Minister for Social Development: AQW 3024/09 asked that I detail the number of SSA staff employed at each Jobs & Benefits Office. The initial response that issued set out the overall headcount for each location.

AQW 3025 asked that I detail the number of projected SSA staff that would be employed at each JBO/SSO arising from the Strategic Business Review. As was stated in the response, it is not possible at this stage to detail the projected number of staff that would be employed at each Site. Nevertheless, the response did set out indicative numbers of posts for each site.

The Agency has a significant number of part-time staff and, as such, the number of people employed can, and will, outweigh the actual number of funded posts. For example, two part-time staff can equate to one full post. Consequently, no direct correlation can be made to the figures quoted in the two responses referred to above and is not valid to subtract one from the other.

Strabane District Housing Executive

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development if the maintenance budget for the Strabane District Housing Executive has been frozen; and if so, what action she will take to ensure that basic maintenance work is carried out on houses. (AQW 5040/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is too early in the review of the Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that might be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget. The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall and a proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made. This is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. The Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes within its programmes at the earliest opportunity and will ensure that all emergency and urgent tenant repairs will be completed.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development in relation to the Warm Homes Scheme to detail (i) the current status of funding; (ii) why funding for most measures have been frozen; (ii) when funding will be restored; and (iv) when funding is restored will applicants on waiting lists be considered first. (AQW 5041/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The budget available for the very popular Warm Homes Scheme has been fully committed for the financial year. My department is on track to meet its public service agreement target to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures. I have tried to secure additional funding for the Scheme through submitting bids during the various monitoring rounds but these bids were not met. A new scheme will be operational in the spring and a budget for 2009/10 will be allocated. Some outstanding referrals for assistance will be carried forward and assessed under the new criteria, and I expect that the majority of those outstanding warm home referrals will receive assistance under the scheme. Inevitably, some applicants who are on the waiting list will not be eligible for assistance under the new scheme.

Private Pensions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the value of private pensions. (AQW 5052/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I appreciate that people are concerned about their pensions in the current economic climate. A number of measures are already in place to ensure people can continue to have confidence to save for their future. The Pension Protection Fund was established to provide a safety net to protect the pensions of members of defined benefit schemes in the event of their employers becoming insolvent. A more

powerful and proactive Pensions Regulator has been put in place to reduce the risk of problems arising in the first place.

It is important to remember that while fluctuations in financial markets will affect the value of assets in the short-term, it is the long-term return which is important for pensions. It is widely accepted that pensions remain one of the best ways of saving for retirement. Many employers provide a contribution towards their employees' pensions and tax relief is given on both pension contributions and capital growth.

I met recently with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and our discussions centred on largely benefit-related issues. In line with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I will be having further meetings with Mr Purnell and private pensions will be one of the issues for discussion.

Pensioners Working Part Time

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about pensioners who work part-time and are taxed on their extra income. (AQW 5054/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I met with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell, in November 2008. A range of issues were discussed relating to our responsibilities for social security, child support and pensions. No discussion took place regarding taxation of pensioners. Taxation, which is an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, is the responsibility of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Benefit Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what steps she has taken to promote the benefit that replaces incapacity benefit; and (ii) to ensure that people who have not been able to get through to the Benefit Office on the phone, have their applications backdated. (AQW 5061/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows.

- (i) Prior to the launch of the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) in October 2008 my Departmental officials held awareness sessions with a wide selection of customer representative groups to promote the new benefit and to address any concerns raised.

All political parties, Assembly Members, Councillors, Members of Parliament, Health Boards, Education Boards, General Practitioners and the major customer representative groups in Northern Ireland were provided with information packs on ESA and offered awareness sessions. Some availed of this offer.

Literature on ESA, including information on how to make a claim to the new benefit, can be obtained from the local Jobs and Benefits Offices/Social Security Offices, the Benefit Shop in Castle Court, customer representative groups, on line or by contacting the ESA Centre directly.

- (ii) Social Security legislation provides for a claim to ESA to be accepted for up to 3 months prior to the date on which a customer notifies the Department of their intention to claim benefit, as long as supporting medical evidence can be provided.

The backdating of a claim to ESA to a date within the 3 month period before the claim is received will be considered by the Department. A customer does not have to make a specific request for this to be done.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of employees in her Department that have disabilities. (AQW 5072/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will, therefore, be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Social Housing

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to estimate the time-scale for the conversion of the former Ministry of Defence houses at Pond Park, to social housing standards. (AQW 5075/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Oaklee Housing Association have already inspected the homes at Pond Park and are satisfied that they can start to be allocated to those families in greatest need from April 2009.

Social Housing

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any future plans for the conversion of the former Ministry of Defence houses to address the need for social housing. (AQW 5076/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have made it clear that I am prepared to consider each and any opportunity that may exist to increase the supply of housing. I have already acquired 112 former Ministry of Defence homes at Pond Park, Lisburn, and my Department is keeping under review other sites that may also be available either now or in the future.

Addressing housing need is my first and foremost priority and if that need can be met in former Ministry of Defence housing, as with Pond Park, I shall not hesitate to act.

Social Security Agency: Use of Languages

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development in what languages does the Social Security Agency publish its literature. (AQW 5079/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In addition to English, the Social Security Agency routinely publishes benefit information fact sheets and rates of benefit in relation to Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and the Social Fund in Arabic, Chinese, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish. The Agency also provides, on request, benefit leaflets and other publications in alternative languages, Braille, large print and audio cassette format.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department supports the rights of people who are registered blind to receive the higher rate of the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 5102/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have raised this issue with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the need to consider this important change to the arrangements for the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance is understood. My Department is continuing to work with the Department for Work and Pensions looking at how this can be taken forward.

Warm Homes Scheme

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have benefited from the Warm Homes Scheme, in the South Antrim area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5117/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details separately the number of heating and insulation measures carried out in South Antrim from 2005/06 until 2007/08.

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Heating	160	180	179
Insulation	380	611	467

Dunclug Action Plan

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Dunclug Action Plan.

(AQW 5133/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Out of the 22 actions in the Dunclug Action Plan, 5 actions have been completed and 13 actions are being implemented. 2 actions will not now proceed. These are the piloting of police community support officers, which have been delayed due to a shortfall in PSNI funding and Ballymena Council's application to Reimaging Communities to address political graffiti in the estate was unsuccessful. Actions not yet started are the implementation of the Housing Executive's estate strategy and Ballymena Council's proposal to provide a new play park. Work is ongoing to progress these projects.

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4156/09, to confirm the date in March when projects and communities will be informed of the decision on category 2 posts, given that funding will cease at the end of that month.

(AQW 5142/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I intend to make an announcement, prior to March, on how services currently funded by my Department but which fall within the functional responsibility of other Departments, may be delivered in the future.

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm when her Department will make a decision about category 2 posts as part of Neighbourhood Renewal Schemes.

(AQW 5143/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Decisions on how services, currently funded by my Department but which fall within the functional responsibility of other Departments, will be delivered in the future is the subject of continuing discussions.

I intend to make an announcement shortly on how those services which address priority needs in deprived areas, will be safeguarded.

Housing Associations

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what strategies and guidelines are in place to ensure Housing Associations apply efficient and consistent standards for new house builds.

(AQW 5148/09)

The Minister for Social Development: DSD provide in the Housing Association Guide detailed guidance for all Housing Associations. It is a condition of payment of Housing Association Grant funding (HAG) that all new social housing provided by Housing Associations must comply with the "Design Requirements" for Housing Associations. DSD requires Housing Associations to formally certify with their application for scheme approval that they have complied with the design requirements. The Department also records the implementation of standards such as the Code for Sustainable Homes, Eco-Homes, Secured by Design, Lifetime Homes that attract additional funding and monitor the take up of these standards to inform their future policy and funding provision. DSD Inspection Team audit the compliance of Housing Associations with the requirements of the HA Guide including the design requirements to ensure provision of sustainable, safe and durable homes.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4408/09 (i) what readings were given; and (ii) from which stations were readings given, for the (a) BT71; (b) BT70; and (c) BT80 areas.

(AQW 5150/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The BT71 postcode area is covered by the Katesbridge weather station. When the Cold Weather payment period was triggered on 29 December 2008, the 7 day rolling mean temperature

ending 28 December 2008 was recorded and reported by the Met Office to my Department as 6.1 Degrees. The comparable figure for postcode areas BT70 and BT80 which came within the area covered by the Castlederg weather station was reported as 4.7 degrees.

On 29 December 2008 the Met Office advised that the 7 day mean rolling temperature for the period up to 4 January 2009 was forecast to be 0 degrees or below in the areas covered by the Castlederg weather station (including BT 70 and 80 but not BT71). Further information can be obtained from the Met Office.

Housing Condition Survey

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4597, to detail (i) the names; and (ii) from what companies, are the members of the steering group that compiles NIHE's Housing Condition Survey Questionnaire. (AQW 5283/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The steering group that supports preparation of the Northern Ireland House Condition Survey form consists of:

Northern Ireland Housing Executive:

- Stewart Cuddy (Chair)
- John McPeake
- Esther Christie
- Joe Frey
- Jahnet Brown
- Donna McLarnon

Belfast City Council:

- John Corkey

NISRA:

- Chris Morris
- Kevin Sweeney
- Stephanie Harcourt

Department for Social Development:

- Stephen Martin

Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations:

- Chris Williamson

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Commission Staff Transport

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission what percentage of its staff (i) take part in car-sharing schemes; (ii) use public transport; and (iii) take single-person car journeys to work every day. (AQW 3449/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission: Northern Ireland Assembly has been working in partnership with a consortium of other Stormont Estate users (OFMDFM, DFP, DARD, DHSSPS, DETI and NIO) in developing a Workplace Travel Plan (WTP).

The main objective of the WTP is to encourage staff to travel by sustainable modes to and from work as well as for business trips. As part of the WTP a staff travel study was undertaken of Assembly staff to establish workplace travel behaviours. A total of 92% of Assembly staff responded to the survey.

Figures obtained show that 9% of staff take part in a car sharing scheme; 15% use public transport whilst 63% of staff surveyed make single person car journeys. As a consequence of this survey a number of travel plan targets have been set for the whole of the Stormont Estate for a two year period as follows;

- Increase cycle modal share to 2% (2009) and 4% (2010)
- Increase walking from 1.4% to 2.5% (2009) and 3.5% (2010)
- Increase car sharing from 18.5% to 24% (2009) and 30% by (2010)
- Increase bus users to 12% (2009) and 15% (2010).

Assembly Question Time

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission if it would consider putting 'Question time' and other Assembly business on You Tube, to ensure that the public has easy access to this footage. (AQW 3799/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray): Following the upgrade of the Assembly's broadcasting equipment (carried out during the Summer Recess in 2008), a full editing suite has been implemented, which allows greater flexibility in the way Plenary Sessions and Committee Meetings are recorded and broadcast. This new capability also enables footage of Plenary Sessions and Committee Meetings to be edited and repackaged for a number of uses and media, including the Assembly website.

One of the key objectives of the Assembly's Engagement Strategy is to enhance the public's perception and understanding of the role of the Assembly, its workings and proceedings. As a result, a project has been initiated to redevelop the Assembly website, in order to further exploit the new functionality enabled by the investment in broadcasting equipment and editing suite. One of the outcomes of this project will be an enhancement and expansion of the audio and video content available via the Assembly website. When the new website is launched, this enhanced content will cover more than the current live stream for Plenary Sessions and meetings held in the Senate and will include a listen again service and highlight packages e.g. Question Time, Committee Meetings, Audio Podcasts etc.

The Assembly is also co-operating with the BBC on its web-based "Democracy Live" project which is due to go live during summer 2009. This will be a multimedia portal offering live and on demand video from all the main UK institutions and the European Parliament. Users will be able to search the content for specific representatives and view their contributions on issues relevant to users.

At the moment the Assembly has no plans to make footage of Assembly business available on any commercial video sharing websites. There are currently in excess of 40 video sharing sites, and it would be impossible to maintain control of Assembly originated material spread over such a large number of sites and ensure that it would not be re-edited or re-used inappropriately.

ISO 1401

Mr B Wilson asked the Assembly Commission if it will seek ISO 1401 accreditation, which is the international standard for public sector organisations committed to greening their operations. (AQW 3821/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): The Assembly Commission has not yet sought accreditation for ISO 14001; however, the Commission is actively pursuing the appointment of a Head of Environmental Services to Properties Directorate with specific responsibility for sustainability. The primary focus of the appointee will be to develop a sustainability strategy with an associated Environmental Management System, following which accreditation will be sought for ISO 14001.

The Commission is very aware of the need to improve our energy efficiency and Properties Directorate has been taking part in the Public Sector Energy Campaign (PSEC) since 2001. Parliament Buildings was recently awarded a display energy certificate rating of 'C' which compares very favourably with other similar buildings and illustrates the progress that has already been made in improving our energy efficiency.

The Assembly Commission is working towards meeting all government targets, including the waste management strategy, and has been taking part in a Stormont Estate recycling initiative since 2006. Approximately 30% of our total waste is currently recycled and further investigations are taking place to determine if additional waste streams can be introduced to increase our recycling figures.

Properties Directorate work closely with our support services contractor, Eurest, on all aspects of recycling and energy efficiency and Eurest have recently been awarded ISO 14001, ISO 9001 and ISO 18001.

Reduction in Paperwork

Dr McDonnell asked the Assembly Commission what steps it is taking to significantly reduce the amount of paperwork it sends to constituency offices and other organisations throughout 2009. (AQW 3833/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): The Assembly Commission is aware of the costs associated with the amount of paperwork that is issued to constituency offices and other organisations. At present, the Assembly is undertaking a review of the stationery office and its functions. Part of this review will look at how we can do our business in a more cost effective, efficient and environmentally friendly manner.

Recently the Assembly Commission has taken steps to reduce the amount of printed paper that it issues to constituency offices. During the latter part of 2008 Members were surveyed and asked to identify the various Assembly papers that they would like to receive either by hard copy or electronically. Following the outcome of this survey the Assembly has been able to reduce the amount of printed paper it issues to constituency offices by 30%. A further review of printed paper is planned to take place later this year.

Furthermore, the Assembly Commission is actively seeking to reduce the amount of paper documents created through better use of information and communication technology (ICT) solutions. As ICT systems are amended or reviewed, opportunities are sought to reduce or eliminate the production of paper records. Examples include;

- The Finance Office has recently upgraded its accounting system to allow remittance advice notes to be issued by email;
- Personnel Office are investigating the use of “electronic payslips” for Secretariat and other staff paid through the Cintra Payroll system;
- The Research & Library Information Packs on Private Members’ motions and selected Committee motions scheduled for debate are available electronically to all Members through a secure internet connection.
- Investigations are underway on the delivery of Committee material in a similar fashion to the R&L Information Packs.
- The IS Office is conducting trials of “eBook technology” as a possible way to reduce the number of “single use” paper based Committee and R&L packs in circulation;
- The Business Office and IS office are exploring the potential of “print on demand” systems for the production of business papers.
- All internal circulars, Secretariat meeting minutes and advice & guidance material is available via the Intranet (AssISt)

Some paper based documents such as forms etc are still required where a Member’s authorisation is necessary but these are kept to a minimum.

The Assembly Commission is committed to working with all other departments within the Stormont Estate to make the government estate carbon neutral by 2015 and is working towards this by looking at all aspects of work and processes within Parliament Buildings including the use of paper.

Security Costs

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission how much it spent on security in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; (iii) 2007; and (iv) 2008. (AQW 3958/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): I would refer the Member to the following table. Please note that security costs have been spread over the relevant financial year.

Year	05/06	06/07	07/08	To 31/Dec/08
NIA Staff costs	875,405	803,285	938,868	685,323
BS* Staff costs	235,566	326,830	612,188	715,861

Year	05/06	06/07	07/08	To 31/Dec/08
Cobra/PSNI	82,900	80,500	169,940	424,082
Security Equip	16,866	24,838	6,705	15,725
Keys	3,455	1,817	1,421	256
DFP Guarding	517,254	521,902	576,982	110,000 **
Misc (security cards, vetting etc)	620,475	629,057	7,483	11,110
Sub Total			762,531	561,173
Security Review Implementation costs			475,869	
Total Costs	1,731,446	1,759,172	2,789,456	1,962,357

* Brook Street Recruitment Agency

** Estimate: 75% of annual costs for Estate Guarding

Assembly Shop

Mr Gardiner asked the Assembly Commission to provide details of the agreement that applies to the sale of produce by Northern Ireland suppliers to the Assembly shop. (AQW 4442/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): At present, there are two distinct agreements that apply to the sale of produce by Northern Ireland suppliers to the Assembly shop as follows:

(i) Items that are purchased by our contractor, Eurest, for sale in the Gift Shop. These are purchased with the agreement of Facilities Branch, and are usually bespoke items that contain the Assembly blue flax crest. Generally, we have found that these items are extremely popular amongst the many visitors who attend Parliament Buildings each year. Eurest endeavours to source all of the “gift” items from local companies where possible. Most gifts are manufactured or processed within Northern Ireland.

(ii) Items that are brought in by local crafters. In May 2008, Facilities Branch introduced an initiative whereby we contacted local enterprise agencies to ascertain whether local crafters would be interested in displaying their merchandise in the Assembly Gift Shop on a month by month basis. This has proved extremely popular, and is currently due to run until April 2009, when Facilities Branch will assess the success of the initiative. All crafters who display items in the Assembly Gift Shop are local businesses from across Northern Ireland. All items are made in Northern Ireland, and where possible, made from materials sourced in Northern Ireland.

Recruitment Exercises

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission what is the total cost of the recent recruitment exercises for (i) clerical officer; and (ii) clerical supervisor. (AQW 4444/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): As both the Clerical Supervisor and Clerical Officer competitions are ongoing, I am not yet in a position to provide the information you have requested. Interviews in the Clerical Officer competition are continuing and pre-appointment checks are being carried out in the Clerical Supervisor competition.

Recruitment Exercises

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission (i) what is the total number of applicants for the recent employment competition for the posts of clerical supervisor and clerical officer; (ii) how many applicants were interviewed for each post; (iii) how many were offered employment for each post; and (iv) how many NICS staff were offered employment for each post. (AQW 4445/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): There were 289 applications received by the closing date of 5 September 2008 for the Clerical Supervisor recruitment competition and 343 applications received by the closing date of 3 October 2008 for the Clerical Officer recruitment competition.

173 candidates were interviewed in the Clerical Supervisor recruitment competition, but as the interviews in the Clerical Officer competition are ongoing (due to conclude on 29 January unless any of the panels reconvene), I am not yet in a position to provide you with the information you requested.

No offers of employment have been issued in either competition. Pre-appointment checks are being carried out in the Clerical Supervisor competition while interviews in the Clerical Officer competition are continuing.

Recruitment Exercises

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission if it has any requirement to buy out existing employment contracts for any staff offered employment as clerical assistant or clerical supervisor arising from the recent Assembly recruitment exercise prior to taking up employment in the Assembly. (AQW 4446/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): There are no terms or conditions in the current employment contracts of NI Assembly Commission staff or seconded NICS staff which would require buy out in the event of an offer of employment arising from the recent Assembly recruitment exercises for clerical officer and clerical supervisors.

There is no contractual commitment or actual payment made to Brook Street (UK) Ltd in respect of candidates placed. Neither is there any requirement for buy out in relation to Agency workers who are offered permanent employment as a result of the recruitment exercises.

Recruitment Exercises

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission whether the interview panel for the recent Assembly recruitment exercise for clerical officer complied with best practice governing the make-up of such panels. (AQW 4447/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): There were three two-member panels convened for the Clerical Officer competition. All panel members received training in Criteria Based Interviewing and each panel was balanced in terms of gender and community background.

Recruitment Exercises

Mr Attwood asked the Assembly Commission whether the interview panel for the recent Assembly recruitment exercise for clerical supervisor complied with best practice governing the make-up of such panels. (AQW 4448/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): There were three three-member panels convened for the Clerical Supervisor competition. All panel members received training in Criteria Based Interviewing and each panel was balanced in terms of gender and community background.

IT Training

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission if training is available to MLAs to teach email and other IT skills. (AQW 4878/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission has approved the provision of ICT training to all Northern Ireland Assembly permanent pass holders. Classroom based training courses are provided through the Assembly Training Officer while the IS Office can arrange for assistance with the basic functions of all centrally provided software through informal coaching sessions.

Full details of the IT training provided and how to request assistance are provided in;

- The Members Handbook;
- The Parliament Buildings IT Handbook supplied to all Members;
- The Constituency Office Handbook supplied to all Members;
- The IS Office and Personnel Intranet pages on AssISt.

School Groups

Mr Ross asked the Assembly Commission how many (i) school groups; and (ii) others, have visited the Northern Ireland Assembly, in each month, over the last two years. (AQW 4913/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray):

	2007		2008		2009	
	No. School Groups	Other Groups	No. School Groups	Other Groups	No. School Groups	Other Groups
January	19	52	32	88	35	77
February	16	32	40	130		
March	27	55	39	104		
April	27	64	82	159		
May	47	128	44	166		
June	56	180	61	179		
July	13	99	5	77		
August	5	111	4	67		
September	21	40	30	144		
October	26	175	30	142		
November	51	152	47	113		
December	29	66	26	81		

These figures include school groups and other groups handled by the Education Service, Events Office and the External Liaison Unit.

Broadband Speed

Mr Ross asked the Assembly Commission if it has made any decisions to improve the broadband speed of personal computers in parliament buildings. (AQW 4914/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): I would refer the Member to Assembly Questions AQW 2606/08, AQW 3232/08, AQW 8185/08 and AQW 1924/09 for previous replies on this matter.

I can report that the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 27 January 2009 considered a report on the status of the Northern Ireland Assembly internet connection. To address the issues identified, approval was given to the IS Office to prioritise the move to a faster connection and review the performance of the internet connection following that improvement.

Traffic Management

Mr Ross asked the Assembly Commission what steps have been taken to ensure that drivers do not speed on the grounds of Parliament Buildings. (AQW 4916/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): The Assembly Commission are responsible for the management of traffic within the boundary of Parliament Buildings and this is monitored by the Security Guards. The road layout and physical barriers in place at Glen East and Glen West mean that there is not normally a problem in relation drivers speeding.

Elsewhere within the Stormont Estate, outside the boundary of Parliament Buildings, responsibility for traffic management lies with the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Healthy Eating

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission how it promotes healthy eating within the Assembly.

(AQW 4929/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): The current Support Services Contract is held by Eurest, who provide all catering within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

From the outset of the contract, it was made clear to the supplier that healthy eating would be of high importance in the provision of the service. This commitment is demonstrated by the following comments incorporated within the contract specification, "The Contractor shall promote healthy eating and shall encourage a reduction in salt, sugar and fats, and an increase in foods high in dietary fibre."

Subsequently, Facilities Branch liaise with Eurest on a regular basis to ensure that healthy eating remains a priority, and since the commencement of the contract in March 2007, several innovative catering options that provide healthy eating have been introduced, to accompany previous healthy options.

By way of example, Eurest currently feature a range of food concepts that provide a healthy eating option. Included within this range of options are a:

- Porridge Bar - A breakfast high in oats and fibre. Served with a range of toppers that offer additional fruit and nuts to increase the nutritional value.
- Breakfast Cereal Bar - A range of PC cereals that is sugar free served with semi skimmed milk.
- Juice Bar - Served from a font there are a range of Apple, Orange & Cranberry juice served with no added sugar.
- Wild Greens - During the summer (2008) promotion of healthy salads was so popular Eurest has retained this offer as a daily option.
- Balanced Choices - Daily a main course and vegetable option is available. This option is nutritionally balanced. Guidance on specific information can be obtained via the Assembly Intranet.
- Fruit Pots - Selection of Mixed fresh fruit, Grapes, Pineapple
- Deli Bar - Range of 10 compound salads (dressing optional)
All fresh vegetable & pasta ingredients

In addition, prior to considering a proposal for a catering tariff increase in April 2008, Facilities Branch requested that Eurest factor in a freeze or reduction of tariffs for several healthy eating options. Facilities then assessed the proposals and negotiated further. Examples from the Blue Flax restaurant of these items were:

- Fruit items e.g. apples, bananas, oranges, pears, pineapple pots, grape pots saw a reduction of between 8.80% and 9.20%.
- Two salad boxes saw a reduction of 9.10% and 9.30%. A further salad box saw a freeze on the current tariff.

On behalf of the Assembly Commission, Facilities Branch will continue to analyse potential options that could lead to the introduction of further healthy eating options in the various catering outlets in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Facilities Branch also remain committed to exploring ways to ensuring competitive and fair prices for the current healthy eating items that are offered in the Assembly.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 27 February 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Child Poverty

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many children are deemed as living in child poverty, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5066/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): There are three measures used – relative income poverty, absolute and mixed. Relative income poverty is the number of children living in households whose income is below 60% of the UK median income.

The number of children living in households experiencing relative income poverty 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07 by Parliamentary Constituency is set out in the table below.

Parliamentary Constituency	Children in Poverty	Confidence Interval
Belfast East	1,900	+/-114
Belfast North	5,700	+/-384
Belfast South	1,400	+/-63
Belfast West	7,700	+/-439
East Antrim	4,500	+/-272
East Londonderry	4,100	+/-272
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	7,600	+/-446
Foyle	10,100	+/-489
Lagan Valley	3,500	+/-130
Mid Ulster	9,300	+/-482
Newry and Armagh	7,100	+/-363
North Antrim	6,000	+/-291
North Down	5,100	+/-271
South Antrim	5,300	+/-241
South Down	8,800	+/-439
Strangford	5,900	+/-325
Upper Bann	6,400	+/-334
West Tyrone	3,200	+/-170
Total	103,700	+/-1,327

Source: Households Below Average Income, NI 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07

Notes 1: As With Any Sample Survey There Is A Degree Of Error Attached To The Estimates. The Confidence Intervals For Each Constituency Represent The Range Within Which The 'True' Value Is Expected To Be. For Example, Applying The Confidence Intervals To The Estimate For Belfast East Would Indicate That The 'True' Child Poverty Estimate Lies Within The Range 1786 To 2014.

Notes 2: Figures In Italics Are Based On Small Sample Sizes And As Such ARE Subject To Relatively Large Levels Of Uncertainty And Should Be Treated With Caution

‘Lifetime Opportunities’

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the supporting actions and programmes to ensure the delivery of targets in Lifetime Opportunities will be published. (AQW 5125/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As well as recently agreeing to adopt the broad architecture and principles of ‘Lifetime Opportunities’ as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and Social Inclusion here, the Executive also agreed to the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion.

It will be the responsibility of this Executive Sub-Committee to agree the priorities and key Executive actions for tackling poverty and social inclusion here and also to agree the monitoring and reporting mechanisms associated with the ‘Lifetime Opportunities’ Anti-Poverty Strategy.

We hope to convene the first meeting of the Executive Sub-Committee soon.

We can assure you that OFMDFM has been working, along with other Departments, on achieving the targets set out in the Programme for Government PSAs. A range of initiatives have been announced by the Executive aimed at alleviating poverty. Progress is monitored in accordance with Treasury guidance.

Child Poverty

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what adjustments are planned for child poverty programmes in light of the current economic difficulties. (AQO 2114/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Members will be aware of the wide range of initiatives announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 15th December last year which were in direct response to the hardships being faced by families as a result of the global economic downturn.

Many of these measures, and in particular measures which will alleviate financial hardship for low income households such as the Fuel Credit Payment, the freeze on domestic rates and the deferral of water charges will all have a positive impact on poverty in general, including child poverty.

In addition, our introduction of the Financial Assistance Act has a direct relevance for poverty and social inclusion and affords the Executive the flexibility to address situations where existing arrangements are deemed either inadequate, ineffective, or in some other way unsatisfactory. Any proposals being advanced under the FAA would of course require full Executive endorsement.

The Executive’s adoption of the broad architecture and principles of ‘Lifetime Opportunities’ as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and Social Inclusion here, and its agreement to establish an Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion re-affirms our commitment on meeting our PfG targets for child poverty.

The role of the Executive Sub-Committee will be to identify and agree key actions which will contribute most to achieving these targets and in identifying key actions the Sub-Committee will of course consider the impact that the current economic downturn may be having on existing poverty-related programmes including those targeting child poverty.

We fully recognise that the targets we have set ourselves, in respect of eliminating child poverty here, are extremely challenging particularly in light of this current economic downturn.

The Executive, however, remains totally committed to meeting the challenge and to working across government to ensure long-term sustainable progress.

The comprehensive Child Poverty Inquiry report and recommendations produced by the OFMDFM Committee provides a useful platform for further work as will the establishment of a cross Departmental sub-group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People, which has been tasked with ensuring a comprehensive and cohesive focus on the issue of child poverty here.

Programme for Government

Mr Boylan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the implications for the Programme for Government on the decision by the Minister of the Environment to ban the advertising campaign on energy efficiency. (AQO 2115/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government is framed under five priority areas which set out a range of key goals and commitments for the Executive collectively to deliver. These are, in turn, supported by a detailed framework of 23 cross-cutting Public Service Agreements which confirm the key actions and targets departments will take forward over the next three years in support of the Executive's priorities.

It is not possible to measure the specific impact of the absence of this particular campaign on the Programme for Government but we remain committed to meeting our PfG targets.

Lifetime Opportunities

Mrs Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if LifeTime Opportunities is now government policy. (AQO 2117/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In line with its statutory obligation under Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 the Executive agreed, on 20 November 2008, to formally adopt the broad architecture and principles of 'Lifetime Opportunities' as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and Social Inclusion and patterns of deprivation, based on social need including:

- its two stated overall objectives;
- its stated goals for each of the four life cycle groups;
- re-convening the Ministerial-led Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder Forum as one of a range of monitoring mechanisms to gauge progress.

The Executive further agreed to the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion, chaired by us, whose task it will be to identify and agree a number of key actions which would contribute most to achieving the goals set out in Lifetime Opportunities and which would be at the core of the Executive's Strategy.

The Programme for Government restates the overall objectives of Lifetime Opportunities as part of its commitment to tackle poverty and disadvantage.

As a broad framework, Lifetime Opportunities provides the strategic goals and targets. The Executive will need to decide the actions needed to deliver on these.

It is hoped to convene the first meeting of both the Executive Sub-Committee and the re-established Stakeholder Forum early this year.

Child Poverty

Mr McFarland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the current economic downturn, whether the Programme for Government target of halving child poverty by 2010 will be met. (AQO 2118/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The number of children living in relative income poverty has fallen by 39,000 since 1998/99; in 1998/99 it was estimated to be 135,000 (29% of all children); the most recent estimate for 2006/07 was 96,000 (22% of all children).

The number of children living in absolute income poverty has fallen by 82,000 since 1998/99. Then it was estimated to be 135,000, with the most recent estimate for 2006/07 being 52,600 (12% of all children).

The number of children living in material deprivation and relative income poverty combined has fallen by 12,600 since 2004/05. In 2004/05 it was estimated to be 89,100 (21% of all children). The most recent estimate for 2006/07 was 76,500 (18% of all children).

Whilst these figures reflect that progress is being made we fully recognise that the targets we have set ourselves in respect of eliminating child poverty are extremely challenging, particularly in light of the current economic downturn.

The Executive, however, remains totally committed to meeting this challenge by working across government to ensure long-term sustainable progress.

Our commitment has recently been restated in our decision to adopt the broad architecture and principles of 'Lifetime Opportunities' and also in our introduction of the Financial Assistance Act which may be utilised to address situations where existing arrangements are either inadequate, ineffective or in some other way unsatisfactory.

The comprehensive Child Poverty Inquiry report and recommendations produced by the OFMDFM Committee provides a useful platform for further work as will the establishment of a cross Departmental sub-group of the Ministerial Sub Committee for Children and Young People, which has been tasked with ensuring a comprehensive and cohesive focus on the issue of child poverty here.

Victims' Groups

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the process by which it engages with victims' groups. (AQO 2119/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Victims Unit is a dedicated unit in OFMDFM dealing with victims and survivors issues.

The unit provides a point of contact for groups to liaise with the Department regarding matters directly related to the victims and survivors sector. This includes matters relating to funding and dissemination of information regarding wider government policy of interest to the sector.

International Relations Strategy

Mr Craig asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it expects to bring forward an International Relations Strategy. (AQO 2120/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is currently drafting an International Relations Strategy and, following consultation with Departments and the OFMDFM Committee, we hope to bring this to the Executive by the Summer 2009.

Child Poverty

Mr McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the provisions of the Financial Assistance Act will be employed to address child poverty. (AQO 2121/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: You will be familiar with the recent debates around the Financial Assistance Act and the uses specified in the legislation.

Section 1 of the Act is for use in exceptional circumstances.

Under Section 2, however, there is provision for the Act to be utilised to bring forward schemes to tackle poverty and social exclusion where existing arrangements are either ineffective, inadequate or in some other way unsatisfactory.

We would wish to emphasise that any determination under Section 2 would require a detailed assessment before any scheme could or would be brought before the Executive.

Victims of the Troubles: Meetings about

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it processes requests from members of the public for meetings about victims of the Troubles. (AQO 2123/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: All requests for meetings with members of the public are processed by Private Office staff liaising with officials in Victims Unit.

Advice is sought from, and provided by, Victims Unit.

Executive Committee

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what mechanisms exist for a Minister to register dissent to decisions taken by a majority of Executive Ministers. (AQO 2125/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In accordance with Section 28A (8) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, it is the duty of the Chairmen of the Executive Committee to seek to secure that decisions of the Executive Committee are reached by consensus wherever possible. If that consensus cannot be reached, a vote may be taken.

Ministers can therefore vote against the matter being proposed and will be recorded as having done so.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Pig Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much compensation has been given to the pig industry because of the dioxin scare. (AQW 5053/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): On the 12th February the Executive agreed to increase the total budget for Cull, Disposal and Hardship Payment Schemes for producers and processors in the pork and beef sectors to £9.6m. Approximately £4.2m will be for pigmeat processors to provide hardship payments relating to the direct losses associated with removal of product from the food chain.

The total Executive budget also covers the costs of a disposal scheme for pigmeat product suspected of being affected by the contamination.

However EC State Aid approval is required and is currently urgently being sought, before any money can be paid to those affected. My Department is working closely with DETI, who lead in support of the processing sector, to secure the necessary EC approvals.

I was also successful in getting EC approval, on 18th December 2008, for a Private Storage Aid scheme for pigmeat introduced here. Although uptake has been slow the industry has indicated that it wishes the scheme to remain open to enable them to derive maximum benefit over the longer term. This scheme is valued at some £6m.

European Fisheries Council

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the impact of the European Fisheries Council decision to reduce the number of days at sea by 25%. (AQW 5080/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Annex IIa of the new TAC and Quota regulation EC 43/2009 sets out the Maximum Allowable Effort (MAE) in kilowatt days available for the fishing fleet by sea area. This is a new arrangement that was introduced through the new Cod Recovery Regulation agreed by Europe in November. The effort available for 2009 is the average effort deployed by fishing vessels from 2004-2006 less 25%. This does not necessarily mean that vessels Days at Sea allocations will be reduced by 25% this year, as allocations at vessel level are now a matter for the Member State.

We are currently discussing with our industry and the other Fisheries Administrations what arrangements are appropriate for the Irish Sea. Our aim is to maximise flexibilities under the Recovery Plan that will permit additional effort to be awarded in return for measures that reduce cod mortality. A satisfactory arrangement must also take account of the recent fishing patterns by our fleet.

I estimate that up to three quarters of the Nephrops fleet could suffer no cuts in Days at Sea provided that they agree to a plan not to catch more than 5% cod. Other vessels will be able to earn more fishing days if they adopt more selective gear or agree to avoid areas where cod aggregate in the spring.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to the Countryside Management Scheme to detail (i) the number of applications that have been received since its inception; (ii) how many application were accepted and in what constituency areas; (iii) the average size of the farms of successful applicants; and (iv) what plans are there to extend the scheme. (AQW 5122/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) The number of applications to the new Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) in 2008 was 4500.
- (ii) Up to 1300 applications have been progressed with a farm visit to allow agreements to be drawn up by DARD. Not until these agreements have been agreed to by the applicant has the applicant entered into the scheme. I anticipate that up to 1300 agreements will be signed soon.
- (iii) I am unable to provide you with information on farm size as no applications have as yet been accepted into the Scheme.
- (iv) The Scheme will reopen to applications in Summer 2009.

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for a breakdown of the £6.5m expenditure required by AFBI, in this financial year. (AQW 5144/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: AFBI earns over £9m a year from non-DARD clients, and the subsequent cash receipts form an important part of the organisation's cash flow. As is customary in business relationships there is a delay between the point at which AFBI earns income and when it receives the cash.

This bid is to cover the shortfall between the cash AFBI needs to pay its operating expenses, and the cash it expects to receive, for the remainder of this financial year. AFBI has confirmed that in accruals terms, it will balance its Budget, this financial year.

	£m
Forecast Cash requirements – staff costs	4.3
Forecast Cash requirements – other creditors	5.7
Forecast cash available	3.5
Net cash requirement	6.5

Young Entrants Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to re-instate the Young Entrants Scheme for farmers. (AQW 5145/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The current New Entrants Scheme which was suspended to new applications in July 2008 will permanently close to applications at the end of February 2009.

An in-depth assessment is underway to evaluate the impact and cost effectiveness of the Scheme. A decision on the way ahead will be reached after that evaluation concludes.

Woodland Cover

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she plans to increase woodland cover; and if so, what areas are being considered. (AQW 5219/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department plans to increase woodland cover by 1,650 hectares over the next three years, as identified in the Executive Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the Forestry Strategy.

There are challenges in meeting this target, not least the current economic outlook and the strong commitment of landowners to continue farming.

We are therefore progressing a number of initiatives to encourage all landowners to consider woodland as an alternative land use. These include:

- Seeking to amend the current Farm Woodland Premium Scheme so that more farmers can access its annual payments.
- Greater emphasis on the promotion and marketing of all forestry grant schemes
- Identifying barriers to increasing woodland cover and how they can be overcome.

Forest Service will continue to provide grant aid and advice to landowners through its forestry grant schemes, supported by funds made available under the NI Rural Development Programme.

It is envisaged that much of the increase in woodland cover will be achieved through the first afforestation of privately owned agricultural land. Planting will take place on suitable sites and will have regard for the environmental value of each site in terms of existing habitats, landscape value, archaeological and historic features. The Forest Service has published an indicative map on its website (www.forestserviceni.gov.uk) which shows where new woodland is to be encouraged.

Rural Public Transport Services

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions there have been between her Department and the Department for Regional Development to protect rural public transport services. (AQW 5261/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rural public transport is a crucial issue for many people living in rural areas and I have identified it as one of five priorities in my Department's draft Rural Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework which is currently out to public consultation.

My Department has been working with the Department for Regional Development on the development of this framework by seeking to identify and deal with gaps in the provision of transport and barriers to accessing rural transport.

My Department will continue to work with the Department for Regional Development to ensure a joined up approach to rural transport provision and I also intend to explore the opportunities for improving rural transport as part of the development of the Rural White Paper.

Broadband for Farmers

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what grants are available to install broadband for those farmers wishing to modernise their farms. (AQW 5371/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are no grants available with the installation of broadband for farmers wishing to modernise their farms. The provision of broadband services to rural communities and rural businesses is an important issue and I have written to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Industry, who has responsibility for telecommunications, about the provision of broadband in rural areas.

The EU Commission have recently proposed an EU economic recovery plan which includes funding for rural broadband under rural development programmes. However the amount of money available to the North under this plan is likely to be small and at present there is considerable doubt as to whether it will be agreed by Member States.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for a detailed breakdown of how much has been spent by her Department on the administration of the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5394/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date £289,000 has been spent on staff time; £30,000 on the independent economic appraisal and £24,000 on printing information packs and advertising.

West Tyrone: Rural Businesses

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farm and rural businesses to which her Department has offered support and the amount in each case, in the West Tyrone constituency, in the past three years. (AQW 5398/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The information is not held in the form requested and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Details of subsidy/grant payments by recipient by European financial year to October 2007 are published on the Department's website. The Department recognises the interest shown by Members in having better information on the level of payments by area. It will arrange to collate the information on CAP, Rural Development and other grant payments for the EAGF year October 07/08, by postcode prefix level and will make that available in the Assembly Library by no later than the end of March.

West Tyrone: Farm Diversification Projects

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm diversification projects has her Department supported, in the West Tyrone constituency, in the past three years. (AQW 5399/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the 2001 -2006 programme which continued to fund projects through 2008 there was no specific 'Farm Diversification' measure. It is therefore not possible to provide details of farm diversification projects supported on the West Tyrone constituency during this period.

Under Axis 3 of the new Rural Development Programme the ring fenced support for farm diversification at £20m will be almost equal to the £21m budget for the whole of the previous LEADER+ Programme. The North West Cluster area in which the West Tyrone constituency is located has secured a rural development budget of just over £18 million and will be agreeing their apportionments for each measure, including farm diversification, with the Department in the coming weeks.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many of her staff are working on the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5429/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: An equivalent of 5.65 full-time staff have worked on the development of the Farm Modernisation Programme since April 2007. This figure is broken down by work area as follows:

Work Area	Number of staff (equivalent full time staff years).
Top Management Group	0.1
Policy	0.13
Programme Development/ Implementation	3.53
Technical Support	0.81
DARD offices	1.08

The figure for the DARD offices includes the 24 administrative support staff responsible for receipting applications and those members of staff that assisted in managing the queues on the opening day of the Farm Modernisation Programme.

Crossnacreevy: Review on

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on what date was a review initiated on Crossnacreevy; and when are the recommendations expected. (AQW 5472/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A review to consider the potential relocation of services at the Plant Testing Station, Crossnacreevy, commenced in July 2007.

As part of the review a business case was developed and it is in the final stage of quality assurance. Recommendations from the business case are expected by the end of March 2009.

Bee-Keeping Industry

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the current state of the Bee Keeping Industry. (AQW 5515/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is estimated that there are currently 1,000 beekeepers, maintaining about 4,000 hives here. Following winter losses of typically 10 – 25% bee numbers normally fall in spring and then come back up again in May or June. However at this stage in the year it is too early to estimate what level of natural winter losses have occurred, though they are expected to be higher this year due to the extreme cold.

My staff continue to assist beekeepers in the recognition and management of their hives through inspections and advice on site, as well as talks and demonstrations at conferences arranged by the industry and at local Beekeeping Association Meetings.

Bee Health Strategy

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on her local Bee Health Strategy as promised at the European Conference of Apidology (EurBee3) held on 9 September 2008. (AQW 5516/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I had indicated at the EurBee3 Conference on the 9 September 2008, my intention to commission work on a Bee Health Strategy for the north of Ireland. However since then, the National Audit Office (NAO), has undertaken a review of the Bee Health Programme in England and Wales, and work on the Defra Strategy has been suspended awaiting the outcome of this Report. In the circumstances I feel it would also be appropriate to await the outcome of this Review in order to take on board any appropriate recommendations, before proceeding with our Strategy. It is envisaged that the Report will be published in the next few weeks and work on the local strategy will then be taken forward.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the negotiations with the European Commission about the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5617/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Senior DARD officials met with the European Commission on 19th February to clarify issues and are actively pursuing a number of options that would enable the scheme to proceed. A further meeting with the European Commission is planned for week commencing 2nd March.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Ballykelly: Former Army Barracks

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any plans for developing the former army barracks at Ballykelly as a centre for sports, leisure and recreation. (AQW 4690/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): I have not been approached regarding a centre for sports at the former army barracks at Ballykelly. However I would be happy to consider any practical proposals for redeveloping the site as a centre for sports, leisure and recreation that would be consistent with the aims and objectives of the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation for Northern Ireland.

Tyrone GAA

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the names of his Executive colleagues that received invitations to attend his reception at Parliament Buildings on Friday 6 February 2009, in honour of the Tyrone teams that won the 2008 Senior and Minor All Ireland Football Championships. (AQW 4978/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Invitations to the Tyrone GAA reception held in Parliament Buildings on Friday 6 February 2009 were not extended to any members of the Executive. However, in keeping with usual practice, CAL Committee members were invited to the event in the Great Hall. Invitations were issued to the following:

Barry McElduff MLA

David McNarry MLA

Dominic Bradley MLA

Francie Brolly MLA

Lord Browne MLA

Kieran McCarthy MLA

Nelson McCausland MLA

Raymond McCartney MLA

Pat Ramsey MLA

Ken Robinson MLA

Jim Shannon MLA

Sports Stadiums: Investment

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will undertake a full green book cost benefit analysis of any investment in (i) Windsor Park; (ii) Casement Park; or (iii) Ravenhill rugby ground. (AQW 4994/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for analysing the cost benefits of any investment in (i) Windsor Park; (ii) Casement Park or (iii) Ravenhill rugby ground rests with the owners and operators of the venues, namely Linfield Football Club/the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) respectively.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. SNI runs a number of exchequer investment programmes that are designed to assist owners and operators of sports grounds improve facilities at their venues. All applications for support under these programmes are subject to full green book cost benefit analysis.

SNI has recently commissioned, on behalf of the IFA and Linfield Football Club, a green book economic appraisal to analyse the cost benefits of a short term investment in Windsor Park to address urgent spectator

safety issues at the ground and to enable international football to continue to be played there on an interim basis pending consideration of the longer term provision for international soccer. Work on this appraisal is on-going.

In 2004 and 2007 the GAA completed full green book economic appraisals for the provision of floodlighting and spectator safety improvements respectively at Casement Park. In 2004 and 2008 the IRFU also completed full green book economic appraisals for the upgrading of office accommodation and spectator safety improvements respectively at Ravenhill Rugby ground. On the basis of these, SNI has to date approved investment proposals from the GAA to the value of £1.1m for Casement Park and from the IRFU to the value of £1.09m for Ravenhill Rugby Ground under previous and existing exchequer grant-aid programmes.

Tyrone GAA

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the names of those Assembly Members that received invitations to attend his reception at Parliament Buildings on Friday 6 February 2009, in honour of the Tyrone teams that won the 2008 Senior and Minor All-Ireland Football Championships. (AQW 4995/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Invitations to the Tyrone GAA reception held in Parliament Buildings on Friday 6 February 2009 were not extended to any members of the Executive. However, in keeping with usual practice, CAL Committee members were invited to the event in the Great Hall. Invitations were issued to the following:

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David McNarry MLA
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Lord Browne MLA
Kieran McCarthy MLA
Nelson McCausland MLA
Raymond McCartney MLA
Pat Ramsey MLA
Ken Robinson MLA
Jim Shannon MLA

Cultural Events and Festivals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding his Department has provided for cultural events and festivals in the North Down constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5129/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Detail of funding, awarded for cultural events and festivals, in the North Down area, is set out in the attached table.

Year	Amount (£)
08/09	514, 515
07/08	25, 439
06/07	57, 175
Total	597, 129

Special Olympics

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has been allocated for those involved in the special olympics. (AQW 5146/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On Thursday 4th September 2008 I attended a presentation by Special Olympics Ireland on Special Olympics Ulster Operational Plan for 2008 -2011, along with Gerry Kelly MLA, Caitriona Ruane MLA and Linda Browne who represented Michael McGimpsey MLA. Although invited, Margaret Ritchie MLA was unable to attend

After the presentation it was agreed that we would give consideration to (i) supporting Special Olympics Ulster proposals, (ii) which Department should take lead responsibility for working with and funding Special Olympics Ulster given the number of Departments that will benefit from their activities.

I wrote to all the Ministers involved on 18th December 2008 proposing that with their agreement, my Department would assume the lead role and that if they were content in principle, subject to an approved business case, they make a contribution to the costs involved to provide the necessary support to Special Olympics Ulster.

I will be considering the matter further when I receive responses from the respective Ministers.

Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for the cost of, and when construction will begin on, the new visitors centre at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh. (AQW 5156/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department is awaiting a business case / feasibility study from National Museums Northern Ireland for the visitor centre at the Ulster American Folk Park. Currently the estimated cost is in the region of £10m. Subject to funding being available and approval of the business case National Museums would hope to be in a position to commence construction in 2010/11.

Cultures: Promotion of

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what areas of (i) English; (ii) Welsh; or (iii) Scottish culture are promoted by his Department. (AQW 5171/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The promotion of English, Welsh and Scottish culture is the responsibility of the respective administrations of those regions. The primary role of my Department is to provide the strategic leadership and resources for the promotion and sustainable development of the culture, arts and leisure sectors in Northern Ireland.

Aspects of English, Welsh and Scottish culture are however also promoted through the work of DCAL and its arms length bodies. Some examples of this are as follows:

- work with the Scottish Executive and counterparts in the Irish Republic in the establishment and funding of the 'Colmcille' organisation. This organisation aims to foster support for the Gaelic language and develop links between Gaelic Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic;
- many aspects of English, Welsh and Scottish culture, history, literature, geography and society are reflected in the stocks of material held in public libraries in Northern Ireland;
- National Museums' collections contain a range of objects of English, Welsh and Scottish provenance across a range of subject areas including Archaeology, Art and the Natural Science. These objects are presented and interpreted in local, national and international contexts; and
- the Arts Council has awarded over £650,000 for Ulster-Scots related projects since 1 April 2004. Organisations funded include Scottish / Highland country dancing groups and pipe bands.

Creative Youth Partnerships

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the work of Creative Youth Partnerships; and whether his Department will consider ring-fencing their budget. (AQW 5199/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of the work of Creative Youth Partnerships, which seeks to promote the participation of children and young people in artistic and creative activities and contribute to the professional development and employment opportunities of artists.

Creative Youth Partnerships provides a valuable service to children and young people in formal and non-formal education settings and community and voluntary groups. By introducing children and young people to the arts and creative activity, CYP can also help to open up the potential for career paths into the creative industries.

A recent evaluation, which sought feedback from schools that have participated in the programme, has been very positive and indicates that Creative Youth Partnerships is making a significant contribution to the artistic and creative development of our young people.

The Creative Youth Partnerships Steering Group has produced a business plan to take the initiative forward, which is currently being considered by my officials and colleagues in the Department of Education. This is taking place in the context of the major structural changes occurring in the education sector and this process will inform the future funding of Creative Youth Partnerships.

Football Offences

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in the absence of legislation, what guidelines his Department will bring forward relating to football offences. (AQW 5349/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The introduction of legislation and guidelines relating to football offences is a reserved matter and therefore the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). The NIO, however, in consultation with officials in my Department, has been working on the development of a public consultation paper on this matter as a first step to introducing appropriate legislation through Westminster. I have also recently met with Paul Goggins MP, the NIO Criminal Justice Minister, to encourage him to publish proposals for consultation as soon as possible.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number and percentage of employees in his Department who have disabilities. (AQW 5375/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by the Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all NICS Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a breakdown of all costs incurred by his Department in the preparation of the bid for the World Police and Fire Games, including consultancy and travel costs. (AQW 5440/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL through the Northern Ireland Events Company contributed £32,587.38 towards the costs of securing the WPFG in 2013. In addition £4414.29 was spent on travel and subsistence for Mr Edgar Jardine, Grade 3 NICS, and Mr Jasper Perry, Senior Events Manager NIEC.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm (i) which officials travelled to Australia; (ii) their grade in the Department; and (iii) the cost that was incurred, in relation to the bid for the World Police and Fire Games. (AQW 5442/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL through the Northern Ireland Events Company contributed £32,587.38 towards the costs of securing the WPFG in 2013. In addition £4414.29 was spent on travel and subsistence for Mr Edgar Jardine, Grade 3 NICS, and Mr Jasper Perry, Senior Events Manager NIEC.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which organisations and individuals were consulted during the preparation of the bid for the World Police and Fire Games. (AQW 5444/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The lead organisation in preparing the bid for the World Police and Fire Games was the RUC Athletic Association in conjunction with the PSNI.

My Department was one of the organisations that were consulted and assisted with the preparation of the bid and did not have responsibility for consulting with any other organisation or for developing the processes.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what process was followed in selecting the individual and/or organisation responsible for the preparation of the bid for the World Police and Fire Games. (AQW 5446/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The lead organisation in preparing the bid for the World Police and Fire Games was the RUC Athletic Association in conjunction with the PSNI.

My Department was one of the organisations that were consulted and assisted with the preparation of the bid and did not have responsibility for consulting with any other organisation or for developing the processes.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to the World Police and Fire Games, (i) to list the appointments of chairman and members of the managements committee and the extent of the involvement of his Department in this decision; (ii) what the remuneration is for these posts; and (iii) if the Nolan Principles apply to these appointments. (AQW 5453/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is currently an interim Stakeholder Group, comprising representatives of my Department, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Belfast City Council and Sport Northern Ireland, managing the immediate work required for delivering the World Police and Fire Games in 2013.

The Stakeholder Group have appointed BDO Stoy Hayward to prepare a business case which will include a recommendation on a delivery mechanism for the games, the cost of the games and potential sources of funding. Once the cost of the games has been finalised, decisions will be taken on how the funding package will be assembled.

Any recruitment of staff and any external appointments will be made in accordance with current legislation and best practice.

All procurement will follow the well established best practice procedures.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure who prepared the bid for the World Police and Fire Games. (AQW 5454/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The bid which was successful in securing the World Police and Fire Games for Belfast in 2013 was led by the RUC Athletic Association in conjunction with the PSNI and supported by Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Northern Ireland Events Company and DCAL

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if staff will be recruited to assist with the arrangements for the World Police and Fire Games; and how will the staff be appointed. (AQW 5455/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is currently an interim Stakeholder Group, comprising representatives of my Department, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Belfast City Council and Sport Northern Ireland, managing the immediate work required for delivering the World Police and Fire Games in 2013.

The Stakeholder Group have appointed BDO Stoy Hayward to prepare a business case which will include a recommendation on a delivery mechanism for the games, the cost of the games and potential sources of funding. Once the cost of the games has been finalised, decisions will be taken on how the funding package will be assembled.

Any recruitment of staff and any external appointments will be made in accordance with current legislation and best practice.

All procurement will follow the well established best practice procedures.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if public procurement principles will be applied in relation to the purchase of goods and services required for the World Police and Fire Games. (AQW 5456/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is currently an interim Stakeholder Group, comprising representatives of my Department, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Belfast City Council and Sport Northern Ireland, managing the immediate work required for delivering the World Police and Fire Games in 2013.

The Stakeholder Group have appointed BDO Stoy Hayward to prepare a business case which will include a recommendation on a delivery mechanism for the games, the cost of the games and potential sources of funding. Once the cost of the games has been finalised, decisions will be taken on how the funding package will be assembled.

Any recruitment of staff and any external appointments will be made in accordance with current legislation and best practice.

All procurement will follow the well established best practice procedures.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to the World Police and Fire Games, what is the estimated total cost of hosting the games; and how much will be funded by (i) his Department; (ii) the public sector; and (iii) the private sector. (AQW 5457/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is currently an interim Stakeholder Group, comprising representatives of my Department, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Belfast City Council and Sport Northern Ireland, managing the immediate work required for delivering the World Police and Fire Games in 2013.

The Stakeholder Group have appointed BDO Stoy Hayward to prepare a business case which will include a recommendation on a delivery mechanism for the games, the cost of the games and potential sources of funding. Once the cost of the games has been finalised, decisions will be taken on how the funding package will be assembled.

Any recruitment of staff and any external appointments will be made in accordance with current legislation and best practice.

All procurement will follow the well established best practice procedures.

Derry/Londonderry: Civil Service Staff

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many Civil Service employees there are in his Department in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5522/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Within my Department there are no Civil Service employees based in Londonderry.

Library Books: Missing

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to tackle the £566,000 lost through missing library books across all the Education and Library Boards, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5557/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Education and Library Boards take the issue of stock recovery very seriously and report annually on losses from non-return of borrowed items.

The Boards have a range of measures in place to reduce stock losses. These include a system which prevents users who have not returned library books from borrowing additional books or from using library computers. These measures will remain in place when the Northern Ireland Library Authority (NILA) becomes operational on 1 April 2009. NILA will eventually be able to operate the measures on a regional basis.

The Chief Librarians of the Education and Library Boards have set up a working group to consider what further measures could be put in place to reduce stock losses. A report from this working group is currently being considered by the Association of Chief Librarians and will form the basis of recommendations for NILA.

Stadia Safety

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to stadia safety, (i) how much his Department has spent in the last two years; (ii) how much has been spent in this financial year; and (iii) where has the money been spent in each year. (AQW 5558/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. In the last two financial years SNI has spent a total of £3,048,119 on safety improvements at sports grounds. To date in this financial year, SNI has released a further £1,733,081 for this purpose. This funding was paid to the following venues in each year:

Applicant	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 to date
Ballymena United FC	£117,873	£27,599	£16,164
Down GAA	£638,959	£161,041	
Tyrone GAA	£419,639	£194,131	
Armagh GAA		£254,952	£492,672
Cliftonville FC		£412,253	£307,747
Fermanagh GAA		£405,123	
Portadown FC		£416,549	£371,620
Antrim GAA			£218,538
Derry GAA			£326,340
Totals	£1,176,471	£1,871,648	£1,733,081

Football Grounds Stewards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the new legislation for football grounds stewards will be introduced; and what extra powers stewards will have. (AQW 5587/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 will introduce into Northern Ireland a safety certification scheme for larger sports grounds including larger football grounds. It is anticipated that the safety certificates will incorporate requirements for ground stewards. Whilst it is expected that stewards will not have extra powers, safety certificates will impose conditions for the

management of stewards by venue owners including training, status, conduct, etc. It is currently expected that DCAL will complete the legislative process to introduce the safety certification scheme in the 2009 calendar year. This timetable will be subject to the completion of the normal statutory processes.

EDUCATION

East Belfast Primary Schools

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the levels of finance allocated as ring-fenced during the years (a) 2007/08; (b) 2006/07; and (c) 2005/06, to East Belfast primary schools; and (ii) the amount underspent and returned to her Department. (AQW 3471/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The table below provides details of the ring-fenced amounts which have been allocated to East Belfast primary schools and managed by Boards during each year; the amount unspent at the year end; and the amount returned to the Department for 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08.

	2005-06 (£000's)	2006-07 (£000's)	2007-08 (£000's)
Ring-fenced Funding	1,423	1,187	1,216
Amount under spent /(overspent)	(49)	171	73

The above figures do not include ring-fenced allocations that are directly delegated from the Department to schools, with the exception of extended schools funding, as a supplement to the funding determined under the Common Funding Formula. It is therefore not possible, nor practical, to trace every individual ring-fenced fund but to ensure the services for which the funding was allocated are delivered.

Tá gach cistiú a leithroinneadh ar scoileanna agus nach raibh caite ag deireadh na bliana airgeadais, tá sé ar fáil do scoileanna le húsáid sna blianta atá le teacht ar an chuspóir dá raibh sé beartaithe é a úsáid agus ní choinníonn an Roinn an cistiú.

All funding allocated to schools and unspent at the end of the financial year is available for schools to use in future years for the purposes it was intended and is not retained by the Department.

Teaching Staff: Sick Leave

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what method the five Education and Library Boards use to monitor and control sick leave for teaching staff. (AQW 4085/09)

The Minister of Education: A revised Teacher Attendance Procedure was agreed between the Department, the employers and the teachers' unions and issued to schools in April 2008. (http://www.deni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_tnc_2008-2_-_teacher_attendance_procedure_final_version.pdf)

The Department provides annual information on individual school absence levels to the Education and Library Boards; the Boards then use this information to identify schools with high absence levels and investigate action taken by such schools.

In accordance with the Teacher Attendance Procedure, the Boards also:

- provide information and advice to Principals;
- advise and support Governors and Principals in managing teacher welfare and attendance;
- facilitate the medical referral process;
- advise the Principal on rehabilitation, risk assessments and reasonable adjustments;
- promote the implementation of the Teacher Attendance Procedure; and
- ensure Governors and Principals are trained in the procedure.

Chomh maith leis sin, is féidir le múinteoirí leas a bhaint as comhairleoireacht trí líne chabhrach rúnda teileafóin 24 uair agus trí sheirbhísí oifigigh leasa a bhíonn á gcistiú ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

Additionally, teachers are able to avail of counselling by means of a 24 hour confidential telephone helpline and the services of welfare officers funded by the Education and Library Boards.

Class Sizes

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education what her Department views as the optimum class size for each year from 1 to 7; and what factors are considered when making such a determination. (AQW 4340/09)

The Minister of Education: I would like to see a reduction in pupil:teacher ratio in schools in the North because the PTR has a key role to play, in particular for teachers in schools with significant proportions of disadvantaged pupils, in enabling them to have smaller classes so that they can deal with barriers to learning; give individual help to pupils; or work in small groups.

This is why I have made available extra funding, outside the common funding formula arrangements, to ensure that, from September 2008, classroom assistants are provided for Foundation Stage pupils in all primary schools.

Policy on class sizes is determined having regard to the fact that the quality of early learning is vital to later educational progress. For this reason the Department of Education's policy has been to keep classes for the youngest children at 30 or fewer pupils. The policy was initiated in 1998 and applies to all pupils at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 (i.e. years 1-4).

Creidim go bhfuil sé iontach tábhachtach go laghdaítear méideanna ranga. Leis seo a dhéanamh, tá gá le mórinfheistíocht a fháil ón Choiste Feidhmiúcháin agus tá mé ag súil go mór le tacaíocht a fháil ó mo chomhghleacaithe ar an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin i dtaca leis an cheist seo.

I believe it is very important to reduce class sizes, this will require additional resources to be invested by the Executive and I look forward to my colleagues' support on the Executive in relation to this.

Male Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps her Department has taken, and will be taking, to address the under-representation of male teachers (i) entering the profession; and (ii) obtaining full time permanent teaching posts; and if she will undertake to urgently investigate the equality implications should this situation remain unresolved. (AQW 4431/09)

The Minister of Education: My Department has encouraged, and will continue to encourage, all of the providers of Initial Teacher Education to draw attention to the gender imbalance in the profession.

As a result the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are ensuring that males and females are well represented in publicity materials, and are targeting all male schools and male groups in mixed schools for careers talks and presentations.

Teachers are appointed to permanent positions in schools through open and transparent selection processes. Employers are aware of their statutory duties under employment law and cannot positively discriminate in favour of male applicants. Although employers may encourage applications from males, through affirmative action measures, they would still be subject to the same selection process as female applicants.

Tá mo Roinn lántiomanta do thúsáite a thabhairt do chomhionannas agus ilchineálacht ina croíthosaíochtaí agus ina croífheidhmeanna. Aithním an tábhacht a bhaineann le comhionannas a chur chun cinn san earnáil oideachais, comhionannas inscne san áireamh, agus aithním an ról is féidir bheith ag an oideachas i gcur chun cinn an chomhionannais sa tsochaí ar fad.

My Department is fully committed to integrating equality and diversity into its core priorities and functions. I recognise not only the importance of promoting equality, including gender equality, within education itself, but also the contribution that education can make to promoting equality throughout society.

Capital Projects

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education which capital projects have been delayed due to legal proceedings. (AQW 4472/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuireadh stop le trí thionscadal caipitil a bhí á gcur chun cinn ag baint úsáide as an chreatlach móroibreacha mar gheall ar na himeachtaí dlíthiúla. Seo iad mar a leanas:-

The legal proceedings have resulted in three capital projects which were being progressed using the major works framework being stopped. They are as follows:

St Joseph's PS, Madden; Magherafelt HS; and St Colman's PS, Lambeg.

Other projects which had been nearing the stage of being ready for the framework are as follows:-

Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint

Dromintee PS, Newry

St Oliver Plunkett PS, Forkhill

Whitehouse PS, Newtownabbey

St Mary's PS, Newcastle

Coranny and Cornagogue PS, Enniskillen

My Department has developed an alternative procurement method so that we avoid prolonged delays in delivering projects which are ready to enter the procurement stage. The project for Magherafelt High School has recently been advertised.

Education and Library Boards

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education if she is aware if any of the Education and Library Boards have money invested in Icelandic banks. (AQW 4477/09)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by each of the 5 Education and Library Boards that they do not have any deposits or investments in Icelandic banks.

Abiding by the Law: Awareness of

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what efforts her Department has made to raise awareness of abiding by the law in schools. (AQW 4490/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá oideachas Saoránachta á thabhairt isteach faoi láthair mar chuid éigeantach den churacclam athbhreithnithe do gach duine óg ó Bhliain 1 amach.

Citizenship education is currently being introduced as a compulsory part of the revised curriculum for all young people from Year 1 onwards. This will enable our young people to develop positive relationships with others, develop strategies to promote their own personal safety, be aware of their rights and responsibilities, develop themselves as members of a community, understand that all choices have consequences and understand the importance of rules and laws and the consequence of breaching these, including the effects of anti-social behaviour.

In addition, the Young Citizens Passport, which my Department issues to all Year 11 pupils, provides clear and practical information, including on the law and individual' rights and responsibilities

Educational Psychologists

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education if all Educational Psychologists PhD students who are currently in the last year of studies will be guaranteed their permanent posts at the end of the academic year. (AQW 4580/09)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives (CEs) of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that the prospects of the 12 students, who are currently in their last year of studies on the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology course at Queen's University Belfast, obtaining permanent posts are very good as all ELBs will shortly be advertising for permanent educational psychologist posts for which the students will be eligible to apply.

Ní féidir gealltanas a thabhairt, áfach, go bhfaighidh gach mac léinn post buan mar go ndéanfar aon cheapachán de réir phrionsabal an fhiúntais.

There can be no guarantee, however, that all the students will secure a permanent post as any appointment made will be in accordance with the merit principle.

School Meals

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education the percentage of pupils at post-primary schools in the Foyle constituency who were entitled to free school meals, in each of the last six years. (AQW 4591/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF PUPILS ENTITLED TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS ATTENDING POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY, 2003/04 – 2008/09

School Name	Year					
	2003/ 04	2004/ 05	2005/ 06	2006/ 07	2007/ 08	2008/ 09
Lisneal College	n.a.	32	31	32	25	25
St Mary's College, Derry	61	59	56	55	53	51
St Patricks & St Brigids High School	28	27	23	28	26	24
St Joseph's Secondary, Derry	n.a.	54	51	51	47	46
St Peter's High School	71	68	66	65	59	63
St Cecilia's College	50	47	45	42	42	41
St Brigid's College	61	64	61	62	62	61
Immaculate Conception College	60	61	54	57	51	46
Oakgrove Integrated College	32	32	30	31	29	30
Thornhill College	21	22	21	21	19	17
St Columb's College	21	20	21	20	18	18
Foyle & Londonderry College	6	4	5	5	6	6
Lumen Christi College	9	8	7	7	6	6
Faughan Valley High School	34	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Clondermot High School	27	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Total For Foyle Constituency	33	34	33	33	30	29

Source: Annual school census.

Notes:

1. n.a. means not available.
2. Figures for 2008/09 may be subject to some minor revision once auditing processes are completed.

St Eugene's Primary School

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the modernisation programme planned for St. Eugene's Primary School, Derry/Londonderry, that was put on hold last year. (AQW 4593/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh ag Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil (CCMS) ar an soláthar sa cheantar, a chuimsíonn na trí bhunscoil i bParóiste Naomh Eoghan.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has been reviewing provision in the area, to include all three primary schools in the St Eugene's Parish. CCMS advise that a revised feasibility study and economic appraisal to underpin any revised options are currently underway. CCMS will then undertake a further period of consultation on any options that emerge from that process.

Home Schooling

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education (i) what is her Department's position on the standard of home schooling; and (ii) to outline the most recent figures for the number of school children who are receiving all, or the majority, of their education at home. (AQW 5021/09)

The Minister of Education: Ceanglaítear go dleathach ar thuismitheoirí gach páiste d'aois éigeantach scoile a chinntiú go bhfaigheann a bpáistí oideachas lánaimseartha atá oiriúnach dá n-aois, dá gcumas agus dá n-inniúlacht; trí fhreastal rialta ar scoil nó trí mhodh eile. Is féidir le thuismitheoirí oideachas sa bhaile a roghnú agus níl aon cheanglas dlíthiúil orthu a gcinneadh a chur in iúl don Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne nó don Roinn.

Parents of every child of compulsory school age are legally required to ensure that they receive full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude; either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. Parents can choose to home educate and there is no legal requirement for them to advise their Education and Library Board or the Department of their decision.

Should a Board receive notification of a child who is being home educated, an officer will make an initial call to the child's parent to clarify the situation.

The officer will check what education provision is offered, provide general guidance on appropriate materials and exam types and will also provide a contact number for any future advice. Annual home visits are undertaken to discuss the provision and determine if the education provided is suited to the child's age, aptitude and ability. Parents are also often asked to submit an annual report to the Board to ensure the child is progressing.

Any concerns an officer may have regarding the adequacy of the education provision are reported to Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS). CASS will then provide advice on curricular provision.

A Working Group, representative of the 5 Education and Library Boards, has recently been established to examine the issues in relation to home education and to make recommendations for a regional policy.

The Department does not collect information on children that are being educated at home. I understand, however, that the Education and Library Boards are currently aware of 186 children, of compulsory school age, who are presently being educated at home.

Home tuition is provided by Education and Library Boards to ensure continuity of education provision for children and young people in a range of circumstances such as recuperating from an illness, awaiting a school placement, following expulsion or assessment of special needs. While tuition can be offered at home, a Board may arrange tuition outside the home environment when at all possible, for example on school premises or in a local library. This approach is an attempt to maintain the habit for the child of leaving home for their tuition. There are cases, in particular for medical reasons, when tuition is home based. I understand from the Education and Library Boards that the most recent figures available indicate that some 392 children and young people are in receipt of such tuition.

Translink

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many instances of bullying on (i) school buses; and (ii) Translink buses, in the Ballymena area have been reported to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, in each of the last four years. (AQW 5154/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní bhailíonn an Roinn an t-eolas seo. Tuigim, áfach, go bhfuil tuairisc faighte ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt de na cásanna seo a leanas d'iompar tromaíochta le ceithre bliana anuas:

The Department does not collect this information. However, I understand that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has received reports of the following number of incidences of bullying behaviour over the last four years:

Year	Board Buses	Translink Buses	Private Hire Buses
2005/06	1	2	0
2006/07	0	0	0
2007/08	0	5	0
2008/09	0	0	0

Youth Workers

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education, to confirm, for each Belfast constituency, (i) the level of financial support provided for youth work; (ii) the number of youth clubs; (iii) the number of youth workers; (iv) the number of detached youth workers; and (v) youth numbers. (AQW 5170/09)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education currently provides funding to the Belfast, North Eastern and South Eastern Education and Library Boards as well as the Bytes Project for the provision of youth services in the Belfast area.

Thug Príomhfheidhmeannach gach ceann de na Boird seo agus Stiúrthóir Bytes an t-eolas seo a leanas maidir leis an bhliain 2008/09:

The Chief Executives of each of these Boards and the Director of Bytes have provided the following information relating to the 2008/09 year:

Constituency	Estimated financial support for youth work (£)(1)	Number of youth clubs/ units (2)		Number of youth workers (3)		Number of detached youth workers (3)		Number of young people enrolled/ registered (4)
		FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	
North Belfast	940,508	7	85	10	62	4	0	4,894
East Belfast	713,450	7	95	11	57	1	6	9,914
South Belfast	690,951	5	77	6	66	2	0	6,608
West Belfast	1,615,726	17	56	24	142	11	8	17,326

Notes

- (1) This relates to DE funding for the youth service, including intervention work and community relations programmes.
- (2) This relates to youth clubs/units registered with the Boards or funded by DE through the Bytes Projects. Not all registered clubs/units received funding from the Boards.
- (3) This relates to full-time and part-time youth workers funded, by the Boards or by the Bytes Project, from the DE Youth Service Budget.
- (4) The number of young people recorded for the Bytes projects is based on a census date.

Male Teachers

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education how many male teachers are employed in both primary and post-primary schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area; and what percentage of the total teacher workforce this represents. (AQW 5186/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table opposite.

MALE TEACHERS EMPLOYED IN SELB IN 2007-08

	Number	As a percentage of teachers in this sector in SELB
Primary schools ¹	311	15.6
Post-primary schools	807	34.5
Primary and post-primary schools	1,118	25.8

¹ includes preparatory departments of grammar schools

Ulster-Scots Language

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to encourage post-primary schools to include the Ulster-Scots language in the curriculum (AQW 5188/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an curaclam athbhreithnithe, atá a thabhairt isteach agam, níos mó scóipe le hUlltais a theagasc, chomh maith leis an oidhreacht a bhaineann léi, ag leibhéal na bunscoile agus ag leibhéal na hiar-bhunscoile.

The revised curriculum, which I am introducing, provides greater scope for the teaching of the Ulster-Scots language, as well as heritage, at both primary and post-primary level. My Department has provided funding for the production of Ulster-Scots primary resource materials, which became available in December 2007. It has also committed to providing similar support in relation to post – primary materials on their completion and is awaiting an approach from the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group on this.

I am currently awaiting recommendations from the joint Queen's University – University of Ulster subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies on a strategic approach to language learning at all levels for the north of Ireland.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Primary Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area are in composite classes in primary schools; and (ii) what variation has there been in this figure, over the last five years. (AQW 5203/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

PRIMARY PUPILS IN COMPOSITE CLASSES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD – 2003/04 – 2007/08

Year	Year 1 – 7 pupils in composite classes	% of total year 1 – 7 enrolment
2003/04	9,918	27
2004/05	9,961	27
2005/06	9,877	27
2006/07	8,815	24
2007/08	8,178	23

Source: Annual school census.

Note: Figures relate to pupils in year 1 – 7 in primary schools and grammar school preparatory departments.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Male Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many male teachers are employed in both primary and post-primary schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area; and what percentage of the total teacher workforce this represents (AQW 5205/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

MALE TEACHERS EMPLOYED IN NEELB IN 2007-08

	Number	As a percentage of teachers in this sector in NEELB
Primary schools ¹	251	12.9
Post-primary schools	813	34.3
Primary and post-primary schools	1,064	24.7

¹ includes preparatory departments of grammar schools

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education whether her new guidance for schools relating to post-primary transfer retains the ban on academic selection as set out in the draft Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. (AQW 5235/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an treoir a foilsíodh de bhun an ráitis a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 cur síos fíorasach ar an chomhthéacs dleathach ina mbeidh iontrálacha iarbhunscoile á bhfeidhmiú d'Aistriú 2010.

The guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly provides a factual description of the legal context within which post-primary admissions will operate for Transfer 2010. I have asked all post-primary schools to consider the guidance carefully and adhere to its recommendations. If that request is listened to and acted upon Transfer 2010 will become one of the key building blocks of reform resulting in a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence that treats all of our children equally.

Artigarvan Primary School

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made with the replacement of Artigarvan Primary School. (AQW 5285/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá pleanáil an tionscadail do Artigarvan Primary School á tabhairt chun cinn ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair.

Planning of the project for Artigarvan Primary School is being taken forward by the Western Education and Library Board. I understand the initial sketch plan (Stage C) was approved in January 2009. The WELB have estimated that construction work should start on site in summer 2010 with an estimated completion of around spring 2012.

Primary Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many composite classes are operational in primary schools, in each Education and Library Board areas. (AQW 5291/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

Number of composite classes in primary schools by Education and Library Board – 2007/08

Education and Library Board	Total number of composite classes
BELB	106
WELB	392
NEELB	391
SEELB	242
SELB	520
Total	1,651

Source: Annual school census.

Note: Figures relate to pupils in year 1 – 7 in primary schools and grammar school preparatory departments.

Composite Classes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what are her Department's plans to address the composite classes in (i) rural schools; and (ii) the inner city Belfast area; and (iii) provincial towns. (AQW 5293/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl sé ar intinn agam athrú a dhéanamh ar na socruithe fadhbunaithe a ligeann d'aon bhunscoil dheontaschúnta rang cónasctha daltaí a theagasc le múinteoir amháin.

I have no plans to change the long standing arrangements which allow any grant-aided primary school to operate a composite class of pupils under one teacher.

Western Education and Library Board Area: School Buses

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education how many accidents involving school buses occurred in the Western Education and Library Board area, over the period of severe winter weather. (AQW 5321/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí cúig thimpiste ann san iomlán a raibh busanna scoile páirteach ann. Níor gortaíodh dalta ar bith ná tiománaí ar bith, ní raibh baint ag trú páirtí leis na timpistí agus ní dhearnadh ach miondamáiste (ar a mhéad) do na feithiclí.

The total number of accidents involving school buses was five. In all cases there were no injuries to pupils or drivers, no involvement of a third party and only minor damage (at most) to vehicles.

Education and Library Boards: Travel Policies

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to outline any incidents when the Education and Library Boards have used 'special circumstances' to deviate from their travel policies; and the reasons for these deviations. (AQW 5329/09)

The Minister of Education: Le linn na tréimhse cúig bliana go dtí an bhliain acadúil seo, d'fhaomh na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) soláthar chúnamh iompair ón bhaile go dtí an scoil i ndálaí neamhghnácha ar 122 ócáid.

In the 5 year period up to the current academic year the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) approved the provision of home to school transport assistance in exceptional circumstances in 122 cases.

There are many reasons why ELBs provide school transport assistance in exceptional circumstances. These include road safety, medical, welfare/child protection/domestic violence, bullying, community intimidation and travelling community issues. Each case is assessed on its individual circumstances. In many cases transport assistance is only offered for short periods of time to allow personal situations to resolve and does not extend to the full academic year.

School Transport

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education how many children have been refused school transport because they live within the (i) two mile limit for primary schools; and (ii) three mile limit for post primary schools; and how many appeals have been successful. (AQW 5390/09)

The Minister of Education: In the 2008/09 academic year 436 primary school pupils and 2,411 post-primary pupils were refused assistance due to them living within the 2 and 3 mile limits respectively. The figures include pupils whose parents had not applied to all suitable schools within the 2 mile/3 mile limits before seeking admission to a more distant school.

Bhí 12 achomharc rathúil ann le linn na tréimhse seo.

There were 12 successful appeals during this period.

Bangor Academy: Fire Alarm

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education when the fire alarm at the Bangor Academy school building was made viable (AQW 5393/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt gur cuid den chóras sábháilteachta sa scoil é an t-aláram dóiteáin agus go raibh coimisiúniú an chórais seo mar cheann de na riachtanais le deimhniúchán foriomlán a fháil don fhoirgneamh.

The Chief Executive of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that the fire alarm is one of the life safety systems within the school and the commissioning of this system was one of the requirements for overall certification of the building. The Independent Certifier certified the building on 30 April 2008. The fire alarm has been certified as viable since that date. The school opened on 6 May 2008.

Bangor Academy: Number of Classrooms and Availability

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) how many classrooms are there in the Bangor Academy; and (ii) how many are available for use. (AQW 5395/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil 89 seomra ranga in Bangor Academy agus go bhfuil gach seomra ranga sa scoil ar fáil le húsáid.

The Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that there are 89 classrooms in Bangor Academy and that all of the classrooms in the school are available for use.

Education and Library Boards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many employees are on secondment; and to which sectors have they been seconded, as part of the Review of Public Administration, in each Education and Library Board. (AQW 5396/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon fhostaithe ó mo Roinn ar iasacht do na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne mar chuid den Athbhreithniú ar Riarachán Poiblí.

There are no employees of my Department seconded to the Education and Library Boards as part of the Review of Public Administration.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW4860/09, specifically on how many occasions has she had such meetings. (AQW 5413/09)

The Minister of Education: De thairbhe go bhfuil Bairbre de Brún ina ball den pháirtí céanna, bímid beirt ag freastal ar chruinnithe páirtithe go rialta.

As Bairbre de Brún is a member of my party, she and I attend regular party meetings.

To date, I have not received any invitations to meet with the other MEP's.

South Eastern Education and Library Board Area: Entrance Examinations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education which grammar schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, have indicated that they will conduct their own entrance examinations in 2010. (AQW 5416/09)

The Minister of Education: No grammar school in the South-Eastern Education and Library Board area has formally confirmed to me that they intend setting breakaway entrance examinations.

Tá treoir eisithe agam ar Aistriú 2010 a mholann úsáid critéar iontrála neamhacadúil agus tá súil agam go gcloionn gach scoil leis na moltaí sin mar mhaithe le córas a chruthú atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chomhionannas agus ar shármhaitheas.

I have issued guidance on Transfer 2010 recommending the use of non-academic admissions criteria and hope that all schools will adhere to these recommendations in the interests of creating a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

Graduate Teachers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to provide the most up-to-date figures for the number of teachers who have graduated in the past three years that have yet to take up a full time permanent teaching post. (AQW 5439/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla thíos:

The information requested is detailed in the table below:

	2006	2007	2008
Total number of graduates	708	712	725
Number employed in a full-time permanent post	401	286	154
Number not yet in full time teaching posts	307	426	571

Education Welfare Officers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education in relation to Educational and Welfare Officers (i) if they have been placed on a new rate of pay; (ii) when it will be implemented; and (iii) what is the timescale for the payment of back pay. (AQW 5510/09)

The Minister of Education: Is ceisteanna iad pá agus téarmaí agus coinníollacha Oifigigh Leasa Oideachais (EWOanna) a bhaineann leis na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna), a bhíonn mar fhostóirí acu.

Pay and terms and conditions of service for Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) are matters for the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), as their employers. I understand, from the ELBs, that issues about pay and terms and conditions are dealt with through the Joint Negotiating Council (JNC) which is representative of the ELBs and non-teaching Trade Unions, which include NIPSA. The Department is not directly involved in this process.

The five Board JNC agreed an indicative timetable for processing new rates of pay and payment of arrears early in the 2009/10 financial year. Each of the Education and Library Boards has advised of their current position and the information is set out in the table below:

	(i) Have EWOs been placed on new rate of pay?	(ii) When will it be implemented?	(iii) What is the timescale for payment of backpay?
BELB	No	February 2009	Planned for March 2009
NEELB	No	February 2009	Planned for March 2009
SEELB	No	April 2009 at latest	Planned for May 2009 at latest
SELB	No	To be confirmed- early 2009/10 in line with 5 Board agreement.	Likely to be over the summer
WELB	No	Intend to process during March/April with uplift to the new scale in May 2009.	Payment of the arrears will be made at the earliest possible date after that.

Derry/Londonderry: Civil Service Staff

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education how many Civil Service employees there are in her Department in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5524/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá 120 ball foirne fostaithe ag an Roinn Oideachais i nDoire.

There are 120 staff employed by the Department of Education in Derry.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5242/09, to outline the impact on her programme of reform if schools choose not to adhere to her guidelines relating to post-primary transfer; and choose to use academic selection. (AQW 5561/09)

The Minister of Education: Éilítear ar scoileanna “aird a thabhairt” ar an Treoir ar Aistriú 2010.

Schools are required to “have regard to” the Transfer 2010 guidance. Any school that decides thereafter to depart from the recommendations contained within the guidance will help perpetuate the inequalities associated with the outgoing arrangements and risks creating dysfunction within the overall admissions process.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5239/09, to confirm that she may ask schools to adhere to her guidelines, but has no enforcement powers. (AQW 5562/09)

The Minister of Education: Mínítear sa treoir ar Aistriú 2010 a foilsíodh de bhun an ráitis a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 go n-éilítear ar scoileanna “aird a thabhairt” ar an treoir.

The Transfer 2010 guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly explains that schools are required to “have regard to” the guidance.

For schools to have “have regard to” the guidance means that they cannot disregard it. It means that the guidance is an important document for them to consider in developing their admissions criteria and in performing their role within the admissions process.

If a Board of Governors does not comply with its duty to “have regard to” guidance issued by the Department under Article 16B of the Education Order 1997 (as amended by Article 30 of the Education Order 2006), the Department can consider issuing a direction under Article 101 of the 1986 Order directing them to do so.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the answers to AQW 5227/09 and AQW 4694/09, if she will exercise her ministerial discretion and release the full legal advice she received from the Departmental Solicitors Office about post-primary transfer arrangements. (AQW 5636/09)

The Minister of Education: Glacann gach Roinn comhairle dlí (agus cineálacha eile comhairle riachtanaí) maidir le roinnt mórbheart.

All Departments take legal (and other necessary types of advice) on many major actions. Like all legal advice obtained by Government Departments, this advice is privileged. I do not therefore intend publishing legal advice received in relation to this issue.

However, the legislative basis for the issuing of guidance has already been published. Paragraph 1 of the guidance states that it is issued under Article 30 of the Education Order 2006. I will quote what this Article says: “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”.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many meetings he has had with each of the three MEPs from 2007 to date. (AQW 4979/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): From May 2007 to date, in my capacity as Minister for Employment and Learning, I have held one meeting with Jim Nicholson MEP, one meeting with Bairbre de Brun MEP and no meetings with Jim Allister MEP. A meeting was scheduled with Mr Allister in June 2007 in Brussels, but did not take place due to unforeseen circumstances.

Education Courses

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the funding per student for a (i) Post Graduate Certificate in Education; (ii) primary Bachelor of Education; and (iii) post-primary Bachelor of Education courses, at universities and colleges, broken down by main subjects. (AQW 4991/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Funding allocations per student to the Northern Ireland Universities and University Colleges for Academic Year 2008/09 were as follows :

	Queen's University Belfast	University of Ulster	University Colleges
(i) Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	£5,134	£4,974	£6,648
(ii) Primary Bachelor of Education (BEd)	-	-	£6,648
(iii) Post-primary Bachelor of Education (BEd)	-	-	£6,648

All Initial Teacher Education at the University Colleges is funded at the same rate irrespective of subject area. The Bachelor of Education degree is not offered at the universities.

Irish-Medium Education: Post-Graduate Certificate

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of lecturers teaching Irish Medium Education Post Graduate Certificate in Education courses in each teaching institution, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4992/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Responsibility for the provision of Irish Medium Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses rests primarily with St Mary's University College, Belfast.

The College advises that, in each of the last five years, it has employed twenty lecturers who contribute to teaching on its PGCE (Primary) course.

An additional lecturer at the College provides Irish Medium Immersion Education for students of Queen's University and the University of Ulster who are enrolled on PGCE (Secondary) courses which have an element of Irish at these institutions.

Irish-Medium Education: Post-Graduate Certificate

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students at each teacher training institution who (i) are working towards a Post Graduate Certificate in Irish Medium Education; and (ii) have qualified with a Post Graduate Certificate in Irish Medium Education, in the last five years.

(AQW 5010/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of students at St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College who (i) are working towards a Post Graduate Certificate in Irish Medium Education; and (ii) have qualified with a Post Graduate Certificate in Irish Medium Education, in the last five years is detailed in the table below:

	St Mary's		Stranmillis	
	Enrolments	Qualifications	Enrolments	Qualifications
2003/04	15	15	0	0
2004/05	20	20	0	0
2005/06	15	15	0	0
2006/07	15	15	0	0
2007/08	15	15	0	0

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

(1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

(2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the percentage of 16 to 18 year olds who have received education maintenance allowance, in each year since 2001; and to outline the correlation of the payments with an increase in the number of students continuing on with education to study for 'A' levels.

(AQW 5019/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme was introduced in September 2004 by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. The scheme was rolled out incrementally to 16, 17, 18 and 19 year olds across Northern Ireland, in line with the rest of the UK, with full roll-out achieved in academic year 2007/08.

The table below details the number and percentage of 16 -18 year olds who have received EMA payments, up to and including academic year 2007/08.

Academic Year	Number of students in receipt of EMA	Percentage of students in receipt of EMA
2004/05 (16 year olds only)	10,593	39.26%
2005/06 (16 & 17 year olds)	18,429	34.42%
2006/07 (16,17 & 18 year olds)	19,857	25.45%
2007/08 (16,17 & 18 year olds)	19,518	25.58%

As the EMA scheme was only fully rolled out in 2007/08, a full statistical analysis of trends has not yet been undertaken to establish whether, among other factors, there is a correlation between EMA payments and the number of students continuing on with education to study for 'A' levels. This analysis will form part of the Departments' planned review of the EMA scheme which is scheduled to commence later this year.

University of Ulster: Students at Jordanstown Campus

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the number of students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5023/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on religion for those studying at NI institutions is only collected for NI domiciled students. Therefore, the number of NI domiciled students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below:

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not Known/ available	Total
2003/04	4,465	6,380	550	2,290	13,690
2004/05	4,415	6,420	365	2,550	13,750
2005/06	4,670	6,900	235	2,045	13,850
2006/07	4,000	6,405	125	1,475	12,005
2007/08	3,685	6,105	105	2,010	11,905

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- (1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and due to rounding the sum of figures in each row may not match the total.
- (2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.
- (3) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.

University of Ulster: Students at Coleraine Campus

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the number of students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5024/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on religion for those studying at NI institutions is only collected for NI domiciled students. Therefore, the number of NI domiciled students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below:

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not Known/ available	Total
2003/04	1,855	1,845	225	490	4,420
2004/05	1,935	1,740	125	440	4,240
2005/06	2,200	1,950	90	275	4,520
2006/07	2,145	1,860	55	190	4,250
2007/08	2,110	1,760	60	315	4,245

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- (1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and due to rounding the sum of figures in each row may not match the total.
- (2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.
- (3) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.

University of Ulster: Students at Belfast Campus

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail students enrolled on courses at University of Ulster, Belfast, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5026/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on religion for those studying at NI institutions is only collected for NI domiciled students. Therefore, the number of NI domiciled students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Belfast, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below:

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not Known/ available	Total
2003/04	420	485	100	190	1,195
2004/05	440	460	75	220	1,190
2005/06	500	525	55	130	1,210
2006/07	475	495	25	70	1,060
2007/08	450	545	25	100	1,120

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- (1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and due to rounding the sum of figures in each row may not match the total.
- (2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.
- (3) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.

Skills Development: North/South Co-operation on

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what co-operation exists between bodies responsible for skills development and the Republic of Ireland's Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN). (AQW 5028/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department, via the Skills Expert Group (SEG), and the EGFSN first met in November 2006 and subsequently worked together to produce an All- Island Skills Study in October 2008. This study was presented to stakeholders at the jointly hosted Skills Conference in Londonderry on 9 October 2008.

My Department continues to work with the EGFSN, and other relevant organisations, to ensure that we have skills needed to take advantage of future economic opportunities.

University of Ulster: Students at Magee Campus

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the number of students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Magee, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5073/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on religion for those studying at NI institutions is only collected for NI domiciled students. Therefore, the number of NI domiciled students enrolled in courses at the University of Ulster, Magee, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below:

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not Known/ available	Total
2003/04	475	2,080	115	360	3,035
2004/05	525	2,215	70	425	3,240
2005/06	590	2,395	50	335	3,370
2006/07	530	2,230	25	105	2,890
2007/08	530	2,090	15	295	2,935

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- (1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and due to rounding the sum of figures in each row may not match the total.
- (2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.
- (3) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.

Queens University: Students

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the number of students enrolled in courses at Queens University, Belfast, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5074/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on religion for those studying at NI institutions is only collected for NI domiciled students. Therefore, the number of NI domiciled students enrolled in courses at Queens University, Belfast, broken down by religious background, in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below:

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not Known/ available	Total
2003/04	6,495	7,770	645	5,140	20,055
2004/05	6,785	8,020	740	5,795	21,340
2005/06	7,360	8,565	850	4,255	21,030
2006/07	6,510	7,920	760	5,295	20,485
2007/08	6,735	8,245	1,105	3,540	19,630

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

(1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and due to rounding the sum of figures in each row may not match the total.

(2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.

(3) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.

Tuition Costs at Queen's University

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what information his Department has regarding potential increases in tuition costs at Queen's University from £3,145 to £6,000.

(AQW 5082/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has not received any information to this effect.

The Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 regulates the fee levels which can be charged to eligible students in Northern Ireland. Institutions can only charge up to the maximum level set for a particular academic year which, for academic year 2008/2009 is £3,145. Under provisions in the Order this maximum level is capped, rising only with inflation, until January 2010 after which any increase beyond this would require the approval of the Assembly.

An independent review of variable tuition fees and student finance arrangements is currently underway and is due to conclude in early 2010. This review will inform future student finance policy for Northern Ireland.

Lifelong Learning Programmes

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is considering dropping the requirement for match funding for community based lifelong learning programmes.

(AQW 5083/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Northern Ireland European Social Fund (NIESF) Programme provides all projects in Priority One with 65% programme funding, made up of 40% from EU Funds and 25% contribution from my Department. The remaining 35% 'match funding' must be secured independently from other public sources by the project promoters. This is the same procedure as was used for previous ESF Programmes and was endorsed by stakeholders in their response to the public consultation process held in March 2007. The 2007-13 ESF funding allocation for Northern Ireland has reduced by more than 50% from the level of the previous Programme. Maintaining an overall 65% level of Programme funding with the requirement for 35% other public match funding has enabled the previous levels of activity to continue, despite the reduced overall allocation.

I have no plans to amend the match funding requirement for the existing call and will review the future position in due course.

University of Ulster: Belfast Campus

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the proposals by the University of Ulster for its Belfast campus will have an impact on the proposed merger of Stranmillis College with Queen's University. (AQW 5123/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The proposals by the University of Ulster for its Belfast campus are not included in the economic appraisal for the proposed merger of Stranmillis University College with Queen's University, Belfast. In evaluating the merger proposals the Department will take into account all relevant factors.

University of Ulster: Belfast Campus

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many extra student places and courses will be created under the University of Ulster's proposal for the Belfast campus. (AQW 5163/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In November 2008 I received an economic appraisal from the University of Ulster detailing development proposals for its Jordanstown campus, which includes the potential for capital investment in its Belfast campus. My Department has not received any detailed proposals in respect of the University's other campuses.

I am advised by the University that it intends to redistribute its existing student places between its Jordanstown and Belfast campuses. Whilst not increasing the number of full-time places offered, the University anticipates that the development of its Belfast campus may lead to an increase in the number of students undertaking part-time courses.

I am also advised by the University that it is difficult for it to be explicit about the number of courses that will be created under the proposals for the Belfast campus. However, the University will continue to respond to, and meet the needs of, the market, as appropriate.

It is imperative that any proposals my Department receives meet Green Book standards. Those proposals will, if approved by my Department, be sent to the Department of Finance and Personnel for consideration. If that Department is satisfied, the matter will come back to my Department for a policy appraisal. The process is in its very early stages and my Department will be better placed to make a judgement as further details become available.

Steps to Work Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the take up of the Steps to Work Programme is. (AQW 5164/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: During the period 29 September 2008 to 6 February 2009 inclusive 2,567 people participated on Steps to Work.

University of Ulster: Belfast Campus

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if teacher training courses will be included in the University of Ulster's proposals for the Belfast campus. (AQW 5165/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am advised by the University that it will not be offering teacher training courses at its Belfast campus.

University of Ulster: Magee campus

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in relation to the announcement that the University of Ulster campus at Magee would achieve a student growth of 5,500 to 6,000 students; (i) what is the timescale to reach that target; (ii) if the previously announced eventual target figure of 10,000 students still stands; and (iii) what is the expected time-scale to meet the target of 10,000 students. (AQW 5211/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am advised by the University that;

- (i) The Magee campus is currently operating at capacity and the University anticipates a timescale of 5-6 years to reach the projected student growth, although this is subject to the acquisition of a site for an additional building or buildings.
- (ii) An increase in student numbers to 10,000 at its Magee campus remains a medium to longer term aspiration for the University. However, the University believes that it is important to concentrate on achieving the ambitious shorter term plans as announced recently.
- (iii) During the planning period, areas for potential growth will be identified and these are likely to focus on postgraduate and part-time provision where course activity at the Magee campus is currently under-represented. Cognisance will also continue to be given to government policies and other environmental factors, including the possible future partnership between the University and Letterkenny Institute of Technology. The next stage of the campus development will be subject to continuous review and, at this stage, it is not possible to identify the scale and pace of these future developments. Any growth in full time undergraduate student numbers will have a significant financial impact for government and any potential expansion of Magee must be viewed in this context.

Unemployment in Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to assist unemployed people in Craigavon to return to work following recent announcements of job losses. (AQW 5226/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department provides information and advice to unemployed people in Craigavon to help them find alternative employment or identify opportunities to retrain under the Department's employment and training programmes. In a number of cases Jobs & Benefits staff have delivered on-site clinics directly to those who had received notices of redundancy. These services have included work focused interviews, action planning and information and advice on the range of measures to improve their job prospects.

Jobs & Benefits office staff delivered on-site clinics to employees of Moypark, Huhtamaki, Seagoe, R A Irwin's, and NACCO and further clinics have been arranged for NACCO Materials and Henry Denny. SSA staff may also attend clinics and provide advice on benefits.

In the 10 months up to January 2009, the Department assisted 1418 people in Craigavon to move from benefits into employment.

Programme for Government Targets

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4784/09, what engagement he has had with Executive colleagues to meet Programme for Government targets for skills and employment. (AQW 5228/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A large proportion of the targets relating to skills and employment within the Programme for Government targets are the responsibility of my Department. However, clearly some targets do require joint working with other Departments, for example the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I and my officials work with Ministers and officials in these relevant Departments on an ongoing, collaborative basis to deliver these targets and quarterly meetings between the senior management of the three departments will be used to monitor progress against the shared targets.

Employment Levels

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4784/09, what steps he is taking to ensure that employment levels remain as high as possible during the current economic downturn. (AQW 5230/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department contributes to the overall level of employment by assisting employers to fill vacancies and by helping individuals to address their barriers to employment and move towards and into employment through accessing employment, training, apprenticeship and up-skilling provision. The Department also provides assistance for those already in work to update and improve their skills levels. In the 9 months to December 2008, over 19,500 individuals were assisted to move from welfare to work. The Department continues to work with employers and review provision to meet the needs of the changing client profile.

A comprehensive range of services is available through my Department's Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres and through contracted Providers to help individuals find employment and to help employers find workers. 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.

University Students Registering as having Speech Difficulties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students at university are registered as having speech difficulties. (AQW 5232/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Disabilities are recorded against the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) guidelines as categorised below:

Blind, Partially Sighted, Deaf, Wheelchair user, Unseen Disability (i.e. Diabetes), Motor Autistic Spectrum and Dyslexia.

Students having speech difficulties may be recorded under one of the above existing categories, and/or may have more than one disability.

The University of Ulster currently uses these categories to record disabilities and does not therefore have statistics relating specifically to students having speech difficulties. Queen's University has been able to confirm that it currently has four students with speech difficulties registered with the University's Disability Services Unit.

University Students Registering as having Sight Difficulties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students at university are registered as having sight difficulties. (AQW 5233/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on disability is collected on the basis of a student's self assessment. In the academic year 2007/08, there were 360 students enrolled on higher education courses at Northern Ireland higher education institutions who were self assessed as being blind or partially sighted.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

(1) Figure has been rounded to the nearest 5.

(2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.

University Students Registering as having Learning Difficulties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students at university are registered as having learning difficulties. (AQW 5236/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on disability is collected on the basis of a student's self assessment. In the academic year 2007/08, there were 1,175 students enrolled on higher education

courses at Northern Ireland higher education institutions who were self assessed as having a specific learning difficulty.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

(1) Figure has been rounded to the nearest 5.

(2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.

College Students Registering as having Speech Difficulties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students at colleges are registered as having speech difficulties. (AQW 5237/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: While Further Education Colleges collect information on the number of their students who have disabilities, they do not collect, routinely, information on the nature of those disabilities. Therefore, information is not available readily on the number of college students registered as having speech difficulties.

Apprentices in East Londonderry

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprentices have been able to continue the academic section of their apprenticeship despite losing their employment, since September 2008, in the East Londonderry constituency. (AQW 5259/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: You will be aware that contingency arrangements were introduced from 1st December 2008, for apprentices who had been made redundant from the construction, engineering, and motor vehicle sectors, and that these arrangements apply to any apprentices who have been redundant from 1st September 2008. The interventions will permit apprentices to complete their Technical Certificate, Essential Skills, and the NVQ element where a work placement has been achieved.

The Department has carried out a full monitoring exercise, in conjunction with Training Providers, on apprentices who have been made redundant and their current training positions. In Londonderry, a total of 35 apprentices have been made redundant since 1st April 2008. This total can be broken down as follows:

Construction – 30

Engineering – 5

Automotive – 0

The current status of these apprentices is as follows:

- 15 have been referred to the Careers Service for advice on further training;
- 11 have found alternative employment;
- 8 are continuing to train under Further Education provision; and
- the remaining one apprentice has not maintained contact with the training supplier.

For those apprentices who have been referred to the Careers Service, they will be advised of the training contingency arrangements that are available to them and, should they choose to do so, will be eligible to continue training under either Steps to Work or Training for Success.

Job Vacancies

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm the number of job vacancies registered in job centres by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5304/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: On Friday 20 February my Department had 1,554 live vacancies, containing 3,190 positions displayed on the Department's job vacancy system used by JobCentres/Jobs & Benefit Offices (JBO) across Northern Ireland. The Department uses the term 'vacancy' to describe a single

advertisement of one or more positions, by an employer and the term ‘positions’ to describe the actual number of jobs available.

I am unable to provide the information you requested by Parliamentary constituency. The data is only available by JobCentre/ JBO catchment area which does not readily map onto Parliamentary constituency areas. Vacancies are recorded by Office receiving them and are available to jobseekers across Northern Ireland.

The table indicates the number of vacancies and positions by JobCentre / JBO area at 2.35pm on 20 February. The number of vacancies and positions will change as new vacancies are added and filled vacancies are removed.

You should note that these figures reflect the vacancies notified to my Department and do not represent the total number of jobs available to jobseekers in Northern Ireland.

NUMBER OF VACANCIES AND POSITIONS AT 20 FEBRUARY 2009

Office Name	Vacancies	Positions
Andersonstown	23	41
Antrim	41	47
Armagh	34	227
Ballymena	54	79
Ballymoney	14	36
Ballynahinch	19	24
Banbridge	38	50
Bangor	92	122
Belfast North	93	198
Carrickfergus	18	18
Coleraine	75	151
Cookstown	16	16
Downpatrick	25	29
Dungannon	26	31
Enniskillen	71	71
Falls Road	43	113
Foyle/ Lisnagelvin	79	208
Hollywood Road	61	105
Kilkeel	1	4
Knockbreda	24	31
Larne	6	6
Limavady	22	24
Lisburn	54	83
Lurgan	65	70
Magherafelt	25	40
Newcastle	34	36
Newry	84	99
Newtownabbey	39	146
Newtownards	75	139
Omagh	31	55
Portadown	59	151

Office Name	Vacancies	Positions
Shaftesbury Square	169	673
Shankill	27	46
Strabane	17	21
Grand Total	1554	3190

West Tyrone: Students Attending University

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students from the West Tyrone constituency have attended university but failed to complete their courses, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5319/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on students attending university but failing to complete their courses is not readily available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) datasets held by my Department. It is not possible to accurately extract information from these datasets on students that attend university but fail to complete their course. Through contact with HESA, they have clarified that in order to answer this question correctly, it would involve an extensive linking exercise of students from West Tyrone across different academic years to see if they completed their course and would involve significant resources to undertake.

Belfast City Airport: Planned Expansion

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the employment benefits that would result from the expansion of Belfast City Airport.

(AQW 5388/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As Minister for Employment and Learning, it is not appropriate for me to engage in the planning debate in respect of Belfast City Airport. My Department works closely with employers to assist them to fill vacancies and to encourage them to train and upskill the existing workforce.

My Department also continually assesses the services and 'back to work' provision available for unemployed clients to help them move towards and into employment.

Should the proposed expansion go ahead, officials in the Employment Service will be ready to assist the employer in the usual way.

Belfast City Airport: Planned Expansion

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he welcomes the commitment to create apprenticeships as part of the planned expansion of Belfast City Airport.

(AQW 5389/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have always maintained that investing in employees and in staff training, especially during these difficult economic times, is key to employers being in a position to maximise commercial opportunities when the economy becomes favourable again.

It is not appropriate for me, in my role as Minister for Employment and Learning, to engage in the planning debate in respect of Belfast City Airport, as this would fall under the responsibility of the Minister for the Environment. Nevertheless, I would welcome any commitment for apprentices to be given the opportunity to be employed, to be paid a salary, and to develop and achieve the occupational skills and qualifications that are required by employers in their particular sector.

West Tyrone: Students Attending University

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students from the West Tyrone constituency have gone to university in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5400/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of students from the West Tyrone parliamentary constituency, who have enrolled on the first year of a higher education course, at a Higher Education Institution in the UK, in each of the last five years, is detailed in the table below:

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
First Year Enrolments	1,385	1,390	1,465	1,290	1,325

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

(1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

(2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.

Derry/Londonderry: Departmental Staff Travelling to Belfast for Work

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many employees in his Department travel from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast for work. (AQW 5525/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of staff employed by the Department for Employment and Learning travelling to Belfast for work from Derry/Londonderry is 10.

Derry/Londonderry: Civil Service Staff

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Civil Service employees there are in his Department in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5527/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of staff employed by the Department for Employment and Learning in Derry/Londonderry is 125.

‘British jobs for British workers’: Public Calls for

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of public calls for ‘British jobs for British workers’. (AQO 2129/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Much has been made of the phrase ‘British jobs for British workers’ implying that local people should have priority for jobs over those from other EU countries or those legitimately in the UK workforce. This is not legally possible, nor is this necessarily desirable. Migrants who are legally entitled to work here have the same employment rights as local workers.

It is vitally important that we ensure those seeking employment here are trained and equipped to compete for the local jobs which are available now and those which will arise in the future. To this end my Department operates extensive programmes to train and develop both those seeking employment and those already in work.

It is also important to us that all Member States abide by the EU employment laws. These protect both Northern Irish people seeking work elsewhere in the EU and local companies competing for contracts in Europe.

University of Ulster: Jordanstown Site

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline plans for the Jordanstown site of the University of Ulster. (AQO 2133/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Proposals for the Jordanstown site form part of the University of Ulster’s recently announced strategic development plan for changes across all four of the University’s campuses.

Under these proposals the focus at Jordanstown will centre on the maintenance and development of world class sporting facilities, subjects related to sport and to specialist engineering activities. In addition the University will retain its student residence provision on the Jordanstown campus.

Implementation of the proposals will depend on my Department approving the redevelopment plans, the availability of funding, and the competition of any appropriate Environmental and Equality impact assessments. The Jordanstown plan is still under consideration and I await the outcome.

Titanic Signature Project

Ms Purvis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to work with partners in employment, including the Titanic Quarter Ltd., to ensure maximum opportunities for the unemployed, and long-term unemployed particularly in East Belfast, in relation to (i) the Titanic Signature Project; and (ii) further planned developments. (AQO 2134/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is engaged with Harcourt Construction, Titanic Quarter Ltd., Belfast City Council, Invest Northern Ireland and other companies based in the Titanic Quarter to meet their current and future skills needs.

It is also represented on the East Belfast Partnership Board, in particular through the Employability Group which is focused on a number of developments including Titanic Quarter. The Department is, also, planning to second a member of staff to Belfast City Council to work specifically on the Titanic project.

Teacher Training: Review

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether the proposed Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College merger is premature in the absence of the long awaited DEL/DENI Teacher Training Review and the concerns outlined in the Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning's Report on the Review of Teacher Training. (AQO 2135/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast has been put forward as the result of a unanimous vote by the Governing Body of Stranmillis. My Department is currently examining an economic appraisal for the proposed merger to ensure its compliance with Green Book standards. Any merger will ultimately be subject to Committee and Assembly approval and I believe that process will give ample opportunity to consider issues such as the Review of Teacher Education and the recommendations in the Stakeholder Review of Teacher Education completed recently by the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Lisburn College

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what additional courses will be offered at the new Lisburn College when it is complete. (AQO 2136/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The new Lisburn campus of the South Eastern Regional College will be available from Spring 2010. The college is currently reviewing its new prospectus for the 2009/10 academic year in light of the current requirements of the local economy. In addition, the college has advised that, ahead of the new campus opening in Lisburn, it is developing its performing arts courses which, until the new college opens, will be facilitated at the Island Centre in Lisburn. This will enable current and new students to avail of a full range of programmes before construction work on the new campus is complete.

Autism Northern Ireland

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what meetings he has held with Autism Northern Ireland, in the past year. (AQO 2137/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Within the last year, no meetings have been requested, nor have I held any meetings with Autism Northern Ireland.

However, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight DEL's Disablement Advisory Service (DAS) which provides a pan disability service. DAS provision is open to people with a wide range of disabilities including those with Autism.

My Department, through Occupational Psychology Services, provides an enhanced assessment service for customers with disabilities, including Autism, to help these customers make informed decisions in relation to training and employment.

Furthermore, I sit on two Inter-Ministerial Groups which look at a range of Mental Health issues, including Autism.

University of Ulster: Performance in Research Assessment Exercise

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the performance of the University of Ulster in the recent Research Assessment Exercise. (AQO 2138/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am very pleased with the performance of both our universities in the recent UK-wide Research Assessment Exercise. The University of Ulster achieved three top three positions in the UK in the areas of Biomedical Sciences, Celtic Studies and Nursing. A further seven subjects are ranked amongst the top twenty and 93.3 per cent of researchers entered are working in disciplines where world leading research is taking place. The league table produced by the Times Higher Education shows that the University moved 18 places from 63rd in the UK in 2001, to 45th in 2008.

Migrant Workers: Protection of Rights

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to protect the rights of migrant workers, against discrimination in the context of the economic downturn. (AQO 2139/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Migrant workers working legally in Northern Ireland have the same employment rights as all other workers. Relevant departments can take action against employers who breach enforceable rights, for example, National Minimum Wage (HMRC).

My Department employs two employment agency inspectors who carry out inspections of Northern Ireland-based agencies to ensure compliance with employment agency legislation. The Department has powers to prosecute or apply to prohibit agencies in serious or repeated breach of the law.

I will shortly introduce an Employment Bill in the Assembly. It will include measures to enhance the Department's agency investigation and prosecution powers, and provide for the lawful exchange of information between the Department's employment agency inspectors and HMRC National Minimum Wage Compliance Officers.

The Department is updating its "Your Rights at Work" guide, which is designed to make workers aware of their legal rights. It will be available in several languages. The Law Centre, which is part-funded by my Department, has recently produced a booklet entitled "Exploited?" which is available in 12 languages.

A Departmental official chairs the Employment Inspection and Enforcement Working Sub-group of the Migrant Workers Thematic Group.

The Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 outlaws discrimination on grounds of colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origin and makes racial discrimination unlawful in employment. An amendment to the Race Relations Order in 2003 implements the European 'Race Directive' (Council Directive 2000/43/EC) here. These amendments give people greater protection from unlawful racial discrimination and harassment on the grounds of race, ethnic or national origins.

Lecturers' Pay Dispute

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the ongoing further education lecturers' pay dispute; and what flexibility the UK Treasury has given to address this matter. (AQO 2140/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There has been no agreement on a pay settlement for 2008/09 as yet. Fresh talks, facilitated by the Labour Relations Agency, are continuing between the college employers and the lecturers' unions. Both sides are exploring fully the scope for settlement within the constraints of public sector pay policy.

The application of public sector pay policy is a devolved matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, which has chosen to follow Treasury guidelines in respect of civil service pay on this matter. Any scope for flexibility is contained within those guidelines. At present, the guidelines state that public sector staff groups must adhere to a 2% basic pay award within a 3.75% earnings growth limit.

Merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether his Department compromised its independence by briefing the Board of Governors of Stranmillis University College about funding issues on the morning the decision was taken to merge with Queen's University, Belfast. (AQO 2141/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A senior departmental official attended a meeting on 17 April 2008 at the request of the Chair of the Governing Body of Stranmillis University College. The meeting was attended by the governing body and a range of other people, including staff members. The departmental official provided factual information on a unit-based funding model. I do not believe this in any way compromised the Department's independence.

Construction Industry Training Board

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the review of the Construction Industry Training Board. (AQO 2143/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The review is nearing completion. Deloitte Consultants have completed the fieldwork, survey and the analysis of findings. The draft report is due to be received by the Department in the near future.

Merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given the Report of the Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning on the Review of Teacher Training, whether Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College should now suspend their proposed merger to help create the fullest opportunity to assess the future of teacher training provision. (AQO 2144/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast has been put forward as the result of a unanimous vote by the Governing Body of Stranmillis. My Department is currently examining an economic appraisal for the proposed merger to ensure its compliance with Green Book standards. Any merger will ultimately be subject to Committee and Assembly approval and I believe that process will give ample opportunity to consider issues such as the recommendations in the Stakeholder Review of Teacher Education completed recently by the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Impact of Economic Downturn on Apprentices

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of how the economic downturn is impacting on apprenticeships. (AQO 2145/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has already exceeded its target of having 10,000 apprentices on programme by March 2010. The increases are across many different sectors but there has been a significant drop in the recruitment rate for some sectors related to construction.

It is also of interest that of this year's occupancy, some 40% are apprentices over the age of 25 years. This confirms that employers are taking advantage of the removal of the age barrier for apprenticeships but it also suggests that in the current situation that they may be training existing staff rather than recruiting new apprentices.

A further impact on apprentices is the numbers that have been made redundant, particularly from the construction industry. Although the Department has introduced contingency arrangements to allow these

apprentices to continue training, it would appear that not all apprentices are availing of these opportunities. The Department is considering how best to address this issue.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Giant's Causeway: Visitors' Centre

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how public money will be allocated for the new visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 4950/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): An application and business plan for financial assistance of £9.25million for the new visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway was received in December 2008 by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board under its Tourism Development Scheme.

The application will be assessed through the established appraisal system and any recommendation to offer financial assistance will be submitted for Ministerial approval.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many meetings she has had with each of the three MEPs from 2007 to date. (AQW 4980/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the period 2007 to date I have had one meeting with Jim Nicolson and Bairbre De Brún. My predecessor had one meeting with Jim Allister.

Invest NI and the Industrial Development Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of co-operation that exists between Invest NI and the Industrial Development Agency. (AQW 5025/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Comprehensive Study on the All-Island Economy, published by the British and Irish Governments in October 2006, identified opportunities for increased cooperation between Invest NI and the Industrial Development Agency (IDA) Ireland.

Although the attraction of Foreign Direct Investment is an area where the economic development agencies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are in direct competition with each other, it is clear that the island as a whole faces increasing competition from emerging economies for mobile inward investment. To this end, the Boards and officials of Invest NI and the IDA meet regularly to promote opportunities for collaboration which clearly exhibit the potential for mutual benefit for both jurisdictions.

Both agencies are in agreement that the focus for collaboration between IDA Ireland and Invest NI should be on strengthening the business operating environment, e.g. Communication, Infrastructure, Skills, Legislative Policy, Business Environment and Knowledge/Research and the examination of how Invest NI and IDA can work together to jointly influence and improve this in a manner that would increase the attractiveness of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to FDI.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what the outcome was from her deliberations with the Prime Minister about Presbyterian Mutual Society investors. (AQW 5051/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A suitable opportunity for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to meet with the Prime Minister to discuss the Presbyterian Mutual Society is in the course of being agreed.

Dublin: International Financial Services in

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many jobs have been created since the implementation of the agreement in April 2008 that allowed companies based at the International Financial Services in Dublin to expand into Northern Ireland. (AQW 5131/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is important to note that there has been a downturn in the Irish Economy in the second half of 2008. This includes a substantial adjustment in the Irish housing market, international financial market turbulence, higher commodity and food prices. This has led to a greater than anticipated slowdown in growth and higher-than-expected inflation. Such pressures have led many companies in Dublin to reevaluate their operations. This means that many organisations that had been in expansion mode in 2007 have started to lay off staff.

As a result, there have been no jobs created in the financial services sector in Northern Ireland following the agreement in April 2008 that allows companies based at the International Financial Services in Dublin to expand into Northern Ireland. The prospects for expansion projects in the financial services sector are not as strong as this time last year.

Notwithstanding this challenging short-term outlook, the Invest NI Dublin office has a healthy pipeline of projects both within in the financial services and ICT/software arena. The general profile and size of investments from the Republic of Ireland has also moved towards smaller projects in terms of total staff but higher quality jobs which pay higher average salaries. Such a trend is evident right across the British Isles. The April 2008 agreement will enhance Northern Ireland's prospects of capturing these jobs once the Irish economy recovers.

Independent News and Media Group: Premises in Newry

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of grant her Department provided to the Independent News and Media Group for their new premises in Newry. (AQW 5169/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI offered the Independent News and Media Group £1.06million of support against a £20million investment in new printing capacity located in Carnbane Industrial Estate, Newry in 2007.

The facility, which is the world's first full colour Goss FPS press, has attracted a skilled, highly-paid workforce. The project has been fully implemented and, to date, Invest NI has provided £814,078.68 of the assistance offered.

Small Businesses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if there is support available for small businesses that are affected by foreign Governments who have suspended payments to local companies. (AQW 5190/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Export Credits Guarantee Department, the UK's official Export Credit Agency, provides political risk insurance in addition to covering commercial risks.

Unemployment in each Council Area

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for (a) the total number; and (b) the percentage, of the workforce who were unemployed in each council area in the past twelve months. (AQW 5231/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The total number of Claimant Count unemployed persons and the corresponding percentage of the resident working age population in each District Council area in Northern Ireland at January 2009 and one year previously at January 2008 are shown in the table attached.

The figures in the table are not seasonally adjusted and the rates are expressed as a percentage of working age.

District Council	January 2008		January 2009	
	Number Unemployed	Percentage of Working Age	Number Unemployed	Percentage of Working Age
Antrim	481	1.5	942	2.9
Ards	820	1.7	1,296	2.7
Armagh	581	1.7	1,061	3.0
Ballymena	607	1.6	1,092	2.9
Ballymoney	371	2.0	700	3.8
Banbridge	320	1.1	709	2.4
Belfast	5,902	3.5	7,997	4.8
Carrickfergus	414	1.7	750	3.0
Castlereagh	431	1.1	707	1.8
Coleraine	838	2.4	1,441	4.2
Cookstown	315	1.4	786	3.6
Craigavon	1,028	1.9	1,967	3.6
Derry	2,807	4.1	3,885	5.7
Down	862	2.0	1,437	3.4
Dungannon	449	1.3	1,176	3.5
Fermanagh	770	2.0	1,318	3.5
Larne	326	1.7	594	3.1
Limavady	588	2.7	1,220	5.6
Lisburn	1,232	1.8	2,141	3.1
Magherafelt	283	1.0	819	3.0
Moyle	300	3.0	507	5.0
Newry&Mourne	1,156	2.0	2,116	3.6
Newtownabbey	807	1.6	1,309	2.6
North Down	760	1.6	1,096	2.3
Omagh	654	2.0	1,116	3.5
Strabane	1,009	4.2	1,399	5.8
Northern Ireland	24,111	2.2	39,581	3.6

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what contact her Department has had with (i) landowners; and (ii) developers leading up to the award of Project Kelvin. (AQW 5269/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department has had a wide variety of contacts in relation to this project and will not always be aware if a contact is either a landowner or developer. Officials have had contact with interested parties in Belfast, Cookstown, Coleraine, Londonderry and Fermanagh in relation to this project.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations her Department received about Project Kelvin. (AQW 5270/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department has received a wide range of representations from parties interested in this project including individuals, businesses, District Councils and potential investors across a number of locations in Northern Ireland.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what formal meetings she held with her officials in relation to Project Kelvin. (AQW 5271/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have had no meetings which were focused exclusively on Project Kelvin. The Project has however been raised at a number of meetings and briefings, for example in relation to the discussion of wider telecommunications policy.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what was the process and consultation that took place with the Department of Communication, Marine and Natural Resources regarding the change of location of the Project Kelvin landing point from the city of Derry/Londonderry to another location in County Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5272/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: This is a joint project between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and representatives from both Departments were involved in writing the Invitation to Tender (ITT) and evaluating tenders. The ITT stated that the landing point must be along the coast of either County Londonderry or County Antrim, west of a point due south of the westerly extremity of Rathlin Island. The winning tender located the landing point in Portrush which met the terms of the ITT.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what was the procedure that led to the change of technical specification and tender documents for the Project Kelvin from the city of Derry/Londonderry to another location in County Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5273/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The procurement process was conducted in line with guidance issued by Central Procurement Directorate, Department of Finance and Personnel. A project team, comprising representatives from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Central Procurement Directorate and MPD (the technical consultants) for the project, agreed an Invitation to Tender which was published on 2 July 2008. Subsequently, there was an Open Meeting for tenderers on 21 July 2008. At this meeting a number of questions were asked by those attending including one question which asked whether the telehouse needed to be located in the city of Londonderry. The project team saw no technical reason why the telehouse had to be located in the city of Londonderry and this was communicated to prospective tenderers at the Open Day.

Renewable Sources

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action his Department is taking to reach the Programme for Government's goal for 12% of electricity usage to be generated from indigenous renewable sources by 2012. (AQW 5289/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The main mechanism for supporting the increase in renewable electricity is the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). This has proved successful in incentivising the increase of renewable electricity to its current level of 7%. I am confident that the 12% target will be met, primarily from onshore wind.

The NIRO is currently under revision to make it more efficient and enable more targeted support to be given different renewable technologies. In addition, my Department is working on strategies to support further

renewable electricity targets to 2020 which will be brought forward for consultation as part of the new Strategic Energy Framework later this year.

Unemployment Numbers

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the number of people who have become unemployed since April 2008, broken down by (i) age; and (ii) gender. (AQW 5303/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The official measure of unemployment is sourced to the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS). However, the LFS is a sample survey and detailed estimates of the increase in unemployment by age and gender are not available from it due to sample size constraints.

The following tables are sourced to the claimant count measure of unemployment. These show the number of persons claiming unemployment related benefits at April 2008 and at January 2009, along with the net change between these two dates broken down by (i) age and (ii) gender.

Age	Number of Claimants - April 2008	Number of Claimants - January 2009	Net Change
Under 18	40	70	30
18	1,230	1,805	575
19	1,450	2,235	785
20-24	5,480	9,580	4,100
25-29	3,560	6,065	2,505
30-34	2,435	4,025	1,590
35-39	2,350	3,680	1,330
40-44	2,305	3,655	1,350
45-49	2,090	3,185	1,095
50-54	1,970	2,760	790
55-59	1,675	2,245	570
60 and over	185	285	100
All ages	24,768	39,581	14,813

Notes: The numbers of claimants in age groups are rounded to the nearest 5, while the total for all ages is not rounded, hence figures do not sum.
Figures in both tables are not seasonally adjusted.

Gender	Number of Claimants - April 2008	Number of Claimants - January 2009	Net Change
Male	19,377	31,571	12,194
Female	5,391	8,010	2,619
Total	24,768	39,581	14,813

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the proposed siting of a telehouse in Coleraine is subject to state aid. (AQW 5359/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The telehouse is part of Project Kelvin which is part funded through the INTERREG IVA programme. The project received State Aid approval.

European Commission Document of State Aid Approval

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the terms Derry and Londonderry were specifically described, on page 2 of the European Commission document of state aid approval, (Brussels, 8.X.2008, C(2008)5610 final), as meaning the City of Derry/Londonderry, and to confirm that the document does not specify the terms as referring to the County of Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5361/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The UK application for state aid approval was made for the INTERREG IVA region.

The footnote on page 2 of the European Commission approval document does not say that every time the term 'Londonderry' or 'Derry' is used within the application it means the city. The footnote is stating that there are different naming conventions contained within the UK and Irish applications i.e that the UK application refers to 'Londonderry' while the Irish application refers to 'Derry'.

European Commission Document of State Aid Approval

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the statement on page 6 of the European Commission document of state aid approval, that 'Both the Irish and the UK governments have agreed that Londonderry is the most suitable location for the direct link to terminate'. (AQW 5362/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: This statement uses the language of the original state aid application and means there has to be access to the submarine cable in Londonderry.

Ballycastle to Campbeltown Ferry

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action his Department is taking to ensure the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry is re-instated. (AQW 5408/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The consultants appointed jointly with the Scottish Government to undertake the economic appraisal of the case for restoring the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service have issued their final report. In overall terms a restored ferry service represents poor value for money.

I have agreed to meet Scottish Ministers later this month to consider a number of policy options.

ENVIRONMENT

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4760/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): My Department has put certain measures in place to assist in help meeting the new 10 day target for payment of invoices. These measures, which were introduced in early December include:

- Ensuring that the certification process of invoices is initiated as early as possible;
- Taking particular care at holiday times and other times of staff absence to ensure that invoices are not left unactioned; and
- Ensuring that creditors are aware of the correct billing name and address for invoices.

Lough Cowey Reservoir

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment how many incidents of illegal dumping took place at the Lough Cowey Reservoir between January and July 2008; and to detail the (i) dates of the incidents; (ii)

amount of waste dumped each time; (iii) number of test holes dug to establish the nature of the waste; and (iv) date that Lough Cowey ceased to be used as a source of public drinking water. (AQW 4880/09)

The Minister of the Environment: (i) NIEA received three reports relating to one incident of illegal dumping, on 26 March 2008, 7 April 2008, and 7 July 2008; (ii) NIEA established, on investigation, that there was less than 50 tonnes of construction and demolition waste on site; (iii) no test pits were dug, because of the relatively small volume of waste involved and that fact that it was easily identifiable from a surface inspection; (iv) I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that Lough Cowey ceased to be used as a source of public drinking water on 6 October 2008.

Enforcement Officers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement officers are employed in each Planning Office. (AQW 5055/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The figures provided give details of the number of enforcement officers who are employed on Enforcement work. There are also six senior officers at PPTO (Principal Planner) grade who are involved with enforcement work combined with their other duties. They have not been included in these figures.

Divisional Office	Staff Numbers
Ballymena	5
Belfast	7
Craigavon	7
Londonderry	7
Downpatrick	6
Omagh	6

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of employees in his Department that have disabilities. (AQW 5069/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by the Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all NICS Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Treatment Facilities

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what criteria are used by his Department when requiring authorised treatment facilities to pay a subsistence charge of £3,100. (AQW 5094/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The level of the charge is determined by both the nature of the waste and annual throughput of the licensed facility. Authorised Treatment Facilities (ATFs) pay the £3,100 subsistence fee if:

- (i) in addition to End of Life Vehicles (which are classified as special/hazardous waste), they handle other waste streams for the purposes of recycling; and
- (ii) their annual throughput is less than 5,000 tonnes.

Under the transitional arrangements for the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003, which came into operation in December 2003, an existing waste disposal licence is to be treated as a waste management licence until such time as it is modified, revoked or surrendered. Since the introduction of the ELV Regulations at the end of 2003, the Department has been requesting holders of old District Council licences for

the de-pollution of ELVs to modify their licence to an ATF licence. The subsistence charge for an ATF licence holder processing only ELVs will reduce to £200 in the following financial year, representing a saving of £2,900.

Treatment Facilities

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many authorised treatment facility operators who did not hold a licence were billed for the £3,100 subsistence charge, in each of the past three years. (AQW 5095/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department may only charge fees and annual subsistence charges for sites which have current waste management licences; it does not have the authority to bill, and has not billed unlicensed waste facilities.

Several vehicle dismantlers with old District Council issued waste disposal licences have incorrectly believed that their licenses ceased to be valid after the introduction of the Waste Management Licensing Regulations at the end of 2003. Furthermore, the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 states that old licences will continue in force until revoked, surrendered or transferred by the Department. These licence holders are therefore required to pay annual subsistence charges.

Treatment Facilities

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many authorised treatment facility operators held a valid licence when they were billed for the £3,100 subsistence charge, in each of the past three years. (AQW 5096/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In each of the last three years, the Department has billed 5 waste operators, holding valid licences, the £3,100 annual subsistence charge.

The subsistence charge of £3,100 is in relation to the recycling of up to 5,000 tonnes of special/hazardous waste including End of Life Vehicles (ELVs) and other waste streams. The charge is set to take into account the regulatory effort required to monitor and inspect this waste activity.

If a waste licence holder modifies their licence to an ATF licence solely for the de-pollution of ELVs, then the annual subsistence charge decreases to an annual subsistence charge of £200.

Treatment Facilities

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many authorised treatment facility operators will be asked to pay the £3,100 subsistence charge. (AQW 5097/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Five waste operators holding valid licences will be asked to pay the £3,100 annual subsistence charge.

The subsistence charge of £3,100 is in relation to the recycling of up to 5,000 tonnes of special/hazardous waste including End of Life Vehicles and other waste streams. The charge is set to take into account the regulatory effort required to monitor and inspect this waste activity.

Treatment Facilities

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) authorised treatment facility are registered; (ii) facilities deal solely with end of life vehicles; and (iii) facilities pay the £3,100 subsistence charge. (AQW 5098/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) There are currently 33 registered Authorised Treatment Facilities (ATFs).
- (ii) 24 of these facilities deal solely with end of life vehicles.
- (iii) 5 facilities pay the £3,100 subsistence charge. These facilities may hold old Council-issued licences or new ATF licences.

There will be some ATF licence holders who pay different levels of subsistence charges because of the range of

waste streams (including ELVs they process) and their annual throughput. The table below sets out the different fees currently paid by various types of facility.

Facilities	Annual Subsistence Charges						
	£200	£1,400	£1,800	£2,450	£3,100	£3,950	£4,900
ATF licence (only ELVs)	24	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
ATF licence (ELVs +other wastes)	N/A	1	4	1	N/A	2	1
Old disposal licence (scrapyards, ELVs, etc)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	5	N/A	1

Legal Action taken by Developers Against the Department

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to list the names; and (ii) the subject matter of all developers taking legal action against his Department. (AQW 5107/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The (i) list of names and (ii) subject matter of all developers taking legal action against my Department is set out in the table below.

Names	Subject Matter
1. Seaport Investments Limited.	Judicial review on the grounds that the Strategic Environmental Assessment undertaken for the draft Northern Area Plan 2016 is unlawful
2. Seaport (Northern Ireland) Limited	Judicial review on the grounds that the Department's 7 November 2007 non-feasibility determination in relation to the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the draft Northern Area Plan 2016 is unlawful.
3. Irwin Glenbank Ltd.	Judicial review on the grounds that the Strategic Environmental Assessment undertaken for the adopted Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries & Retail Designations Plan 2010 is unlawful.
4. Vico Kent Ltd	Judicial review on the grounds that the adoption of the Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries & Retail Designations Plan 2010 is unlawful.
5. Irwin Glenbank Ltd	Judicial review of the Department's decision to grant planning permission for a superstore at Marlborough Retail Park, Craigavon on the grounds that the Department erred in law by taking into account the Craigavon Town Centre and Retail Designations Plan 2010 as a material consideration.
6. C P Thompson	Judicial review in relation to planning application R/2005/1097 re demolition of dwelling at 45 Bryansford Village, Newcastle for Housing scheme to include 23 dwellings on the grounds that the granting of permission by Planning Service in the absence of a decision of the full Planning Service Management Board is unlawful.
7. Wilkinson/Clifford	Legal action against the Department in relation to planning application S/2002/0362 re lands to the rear of 76 Stoneyford Road for the erection of 76 dwellings. The claim relates to flooding which occurred at the dwellings occupied by the plaintiffs.
8. Seaport Ltd	Judicial review against the Department's decision not to ask the PAC to hold a hearing into the National Trust Application for visitors' Centre at Giants Causeway & to conjoin with the hearing of Seaport Ltd for which the Department has issued an Notice of opinion to refuse.
9. Elcor Resources	Legal action against planning application Z/1994/1017/O for outline planning permission to develop a petrol filling station including shop and car wash on a site between Milner Street and the Westlink, BT12. Elcor are claiming compensation against both DoE and DRD for what they believe to be unique events which have surrounded the determination of the application.

Names	Subject Matter
10. Sandale Developments	Judicial review against the granting of planning permission for a replacement secondary school in Carrickmore on the grounds that the Decision is unlawful in that the Department:- 1) failed to have regard for material considerations; 2) failed to conduct any or an adequate inquiry into material considerations raised; 3) took into account an irrelevant consideration; 4) acted unreasonably and irrationally; 5) road safety; and 6) failed to conduct an adequate inquiry into the application to consider engineering works, archaeological conditions, listed building, Local Landscape Policy Area and the requirement for an Environmental Impact Assessment.
11. Hetherington	Judicial Review on the grounds that as a result of his two planning applications, submitted before 16 March 2006, being made invalid and returned, PPS14 became a material consideration for his proposal when resubmitted after the cut off date.
12. Central Craigavon Ltd	Judicial Review on the transfer of Draft PPS 5 'Retailing, Town Centres & Commercial Leisure Developments' from the Department for Regional Development to the Department of the Environment.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment why his Department decided to set subsistence charges for authorised treatment facilities at £3,100; and whether this charge reflects actual costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQW 5161/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department is required to have in place a charging scheme of fees and subsistence charges sufficient to recover its costs in exercising its functions under the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997 and Waste Licensing Regulations. The overall aim of the charging scheme is to provide full cost recovery for the regulation of specified waste management activities in keeping with the “polluter pays” principle.

The charges cover a wide range of activities, including inspections, follow up on non-compliances and improvement requirements, and responding to complaints.

The subsistence charge of £3,100 is in relation to the recycling of up to 5,000 tonnes of special/hazardous waste including End of Life Vehicles and other waste streams. The charge is set to take into account the regulatory effort required to monitor and inspect this waste activity.

NIEA has not revised its waste management charges since their introduction in 2004. As a result, there is currently a deficit of £53,000 and subsistence charges need to increase by 5% to reflect staff costs and regulatory effort required to undertake the increasing workload under the legislation.

The Department issued a consultation paper proposing an increase of 5% in fees and subsistence charges on 23 January 2009. This document may be viewed on

http://www.ni-environment.gov.uk/review_of_waste_activities_fees_and_charges.pdf

Section 75 Training for Departmental Staff

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many; and (ii) what percentage of his Department's staff have received formal training on Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. (AQW 5177/09)

The Minister of the Environment: At 1 February 2009 the Department has 3114 staff in post, of whom 788 (25%) have received formal training in Section 75.

Planning Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications have been lodged with the Planning Service for (i) three or more years, (ii) four or more years and (iii) five or more years, without a determination. (AQW 5212/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of applications in the planning system awaiting a determination by my Department for 3 or more years, 4 or more years and 5 or more years at 30 September 2008 are as follows:

NUMBER OF OUTSTANDING PLANNING APPLICATIONS AT 30TH SEPTEMBER 2008

3 or more years	505
4 or more years	265
5 or more years	167

The figure for 3 or more years includes the figures for 4 or more years and 5 or more years. The figure for 4 or more years includes the figure for 5 or more years.

Planning Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement cases (i) have been lodged; and (ii) were cleared, in each of the Planning Service Divisions, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5213/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is not able to provide the requested figures on a year by year basis for each of the Planning Service Divisions. To provide accurate figures for the information requested can be done by a manual search of our records but would incur disproportionate costs. Work is ongoing and nearing completion to provide an upgrade of the current system of electronic data retrieval - 20/20- to allow for more accurate recording and monitoring of information relating to enforcement.

I am able to provide a total number of enforcement cases opened and closed by each Planning Service Division in the last 5 years which are as follows.

Division	Cases Opened	Cases Closed
Planning HQ	1433	984
Belfast	3511	3338
Ballymena	2857	2320
Northern	2924	2393
Downpatrick	3520	2412
Craigavon	2762	1332
Omagh	2505	2041

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer AQW 4026/09, if the cost of returned planning applications could be recorded and monitored for potential monetary savings. (AQW 5215/09)

The Minister of the Environment: One of the main aims of the introduction of the invalids system was to improve the quality/completeness of applications submitted. Evidence would suggest that the number of invalids being returned has significantly decreased this year and with the release of Pandarus, which includes the introduction of the new fee calculator, we should see a significant improvement in both the quality and accuracy of applications which should result in a significant decrease in the numbers returned.

It would therefore not be cost effective to introduce a new system to record the cost of returning invalid applications when the numbers are decreasing and subsequently so is the cost of returning them.

PPS 21 Applications

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the refusal (deferral) reasons of all draft PPS21 applications to date, broken down by Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 5260/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently considering reassessment of deferred and new draft PPS 21 applications. It was agreed through an action plan that approvals would issue first with lesser priority given to potential refusal applications and re-consultation with Council would be held until after the public consultation period.

Deferred applications are being reconsidered by application type and date received e.g. replacement dwellings, off site replacements, dwellings on farms, special circumstances cases. Where appropriate, Divisional offices are contacting applicants to determine whether any additional information is necessary to enable full assessment of the proposal under draft PPS21.

No refusals have been taken to Council to date and an initial indication of the reasons for potential refusals include:

- (a) applications which still do not meet the dPPS21 replacement policy including proposed replacement of vernacular buildings or where the new dwelling is to be built on a site which does not comply with planning policy;
- (b) a new house on a farm which is not on a site which is visually linked or sited to cluster with an established group of buildings on a farm;
- (c) the site does not comply with the policies for integration and design of buildings in the countryside or would cause a detrimental change to the rural character of an area;
- (d) the proposed dwelling does not fall within the scope of the categories identified in policy CTY 1, ie, it is not:
 - a replacement dwelling in accordance with Policy CTY 3;
 - a dwelling based on special personal or domestic circumstances in accordance with Policy CTY 6;
 - a dwelling to meet the essential needs of a non-agricultural business enterprise in accordance with Policy CTY 7;
 - the development of a small gap site within an otherwise substantial and continuously built up frontage in accordance with Policy CTY 8; or
 - a dwelling on a farm in accordance with Policy CTY 10.

Solar Panels: Domestic

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to exempt domestic solar panels from requiring planning permission. (AQW 5265/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Solar panels fitted to the wall or roof of a dwellinghouse and complying with the requirements of Classes A and B of Part 1, Schedule 1 to the Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 1993 are already permitted development, as are solar panels fitted to other buildings within the curtilage of a dwellinghouse complying with Class D of Part 1. However, I propose to bring forward legislation providing specific permitted development rights for solar panels, including standalone equipment within the curtilage of a dwellinghouse, later this year.

Vehicle Tax Bands

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment how many cars does his Department or its agencies own, broken down by vehicle tax bands. (AQW 5287/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department owns 79 cars, which I have interpreted as any vehicle designed to carry passengers, more specifically those vehicles which have a back seat. The cars are owned by two agencies within my Department, the Driver and Vehicle Agency and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, and include a number of four wheel drive and people carrier style vehicles.

A break down by vehicle tax band is set out in the table below. Only 77 vehicles are included as two of the cars owned were manufactured before 2001 and would therefore be taxed based on engine size rather than emission levels.

Tax Band	Number of Cars Owned
Heavy Goods Vehicle Band A	4
Light Goods Vehicle	44
Private Light Goods Vehicle	10
Band D	5
Band E	4
Band F	10
Total	77

Domestic Rate for Local Councils

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what is the domestic rate for each of the local councils, for the financial year 2009/10. (AQW 5340/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The domestic rate and the non-domestic rate for each of the local councils are set out in the table below.

District Council	Non-Domestic Rate Pence	Domestic Rate Pence
Antrim	25.5261	0.3404
Ards	21.6090	0.2617
Armagh	26.9256	0.3628
Ballymena	24.2151	0.3345
Ballymoney	24.1347	0.3097
Banbridge	24.4075	0.3244
Belfast	23.7325	0.2717
Carrickfergus	25.2222	0.3450
Castlereagh	15.8221	0.1902
Coleraine	21.3192	0.2812
Cookstown	21.0292	0.2663
Craigavon	23.0338	0.3576
Derry	25.8003	0.3730
Down	23.7441	0.3143
Dungannon and South Tyrone	20.8161	0.2542
Fermanagh	17.0713	0.2357
Larne	22.4881	0.3318
Limavady	25.6732	0.3750
Lisburn	18.1180	0.2374
Magherafelt	18.5751	0.2344
Moyle	30.3867	0.3749

District Council	Non-Domestic Rate Pence	Domestic Rate Pence
Newry and Mourne	21.8891	0.2992
Newtownabbey	23.8808	0.3057
North Down	19.2253	0.2598
Omagh	21.8609	0.3553
Strabane	22.8741	0.3361

Non-Domestic Rate for Local Councils

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what is the non-domestic rate for each of the local councils, in the financial year 2009/10. (AQW 5341/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The domestic rate and the non-domestic rate for each of the local councils are set out in the table below.

District Council	Non-Domestic Rate Pence	Domestic Rate Pence
Antrim	25.5261	0.3404
Ards	21.6090	0.2617
Armagh	26.9256	0.3628
Ballymena	24.2151	0.3345
Ballymoney	24.1347	0.3097
Banbridge	24.4075	0.3244
Belfast	23.7325	0.2717
Carrickfergus	25.2222	0.3450
Castlereagh	15.8221	0.1902
Coleraine	21.3192	0.2812
Cookstown	21.0292	0.2663
Craigavon	23.0338	0.3576
Derry	25.8003	0.3730
Down	23.7441	0.3143
Dungannon and South Tyrone	20.8161	0.2542
Fermanagh	17.0713	0.2357
Larne	22.4881	0.3318
Limavady	25.6732	0.3750
Lisburn	18.1180	0.2374
Magherafelt	18.5751	0.2344
Moyle	30.3867	0.3749
Newry and Mourne	21.8891	0.2992
Newtownabbey	23.8808	0.3057
North Down	19.2253	0.2598
Omagh	21.8609	0.3553
Strabane	22.8741	0.3361

Planning Service: Craigavon Section Office

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the backlog of applications in Planning Service in the Craigavon Section Office. (AQW 5350/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no backlog of planning applications in the Craigavon Planning Office as all applications are being assessed or reconsidered including draft PPS 14 deferrals.

Published statistical information for applications being processed at 30 September 2008 in the Official Statistical publication is shown in the attached table.

NO OF CURRENT APPLICATIONS IN CRAIGAVON DIVISION PUBLISHED AT 30/09/2008

Armagh	723
Banbridge	453
Craigavon	529
Newry & Mourne	1555
Divisional Total	3260

A further update of published figures to 31 December 2008 is due on 20 March 2009.

Economic Development: Local Council Spening on

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money was spent on economic development by each local council, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5412/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The gross expenditure on economic development by each district council has been extracted from councils' certified accounts, for each of the last five years. The figures are summarised in the table below.

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	709,622	892,245	477,497	416,380	475,730
Ards	589,466	486,267	473,367	867,970	598,435
Armagh	350,221	572,808	506,043	481,038	776,300
Ballymena	721,358	699,758	750,739	728,374	546,934
Ballymoney	267,462	313,818	350,617	276,045	312,589
Banbridge	683,699	702,068	583,029	640,946	715,828
Belfast	2,878,741	4,547,412	5,103,699	6,710,346	7,638,524
Carrickfergus	273,492	349,913	289,091	293,764	374,999
Castlereagh	96,875	214,312	227,412	178,652	197,554
Coleraine	421,995	528,352	614,373	569,570	674,023
Cookstown	419,788	312,486	441,526	506,088	539,253
Craigavon	1,062,420	943,150	1,016,069	1,053,062	1,284,704
Derry	1,512,506	1,378,035	2,058,095	3,897,071	3,157,519
Down	510,085	712,088	525,835	556,154	597,916
Dungannon and South Tyrone	718,965	968,509	1,384,453	1,226,874	1,377,777
Fermanagh	542,502	528,029	493,374	453,732	601,934
Larne	336,083	208,468	188,461	180,845	245,466

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Limavady	367,535	460,961	467,125	242,512	419,636
Lisburn	1,075,034	1,002,970	833,160	1,067,552	951,195
Magherafelt	266,315	171,169	243,984	394,489	309,936
Moyle	372,938	328,413	267,836	314,990	307,135
Newry and Mourne	1,101,772	715,911	647,847	517,529	643,012
Newtownabbey	490,012	783,192	543,382	652,713	676,801
North Down	659,500	1,007,096	849,987	867,988	949,781
Omagh	1,588,623	2,163,708	1,548,228	1,300,063	1,130,912
Strabane	237,978	247,129	342,503	320,284	879,373
Total	18,254,987	21,238,267	21,227,732	24,715,031	26,383,266

Oil Plume

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment in relation to the oil plume off the east coast of Ireland, what contact he has had with the Irish coast guards and his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland government. (AQW 5443/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has had discussions with both the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and the Irish Coast Guard regarding the spill off the south coast of Ireland. It is the role of the MCA to liaise with the local authorities in relation to this incident, including the Republic of Ireland government.

Oil Plume

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment in relation to the oil plume off the east coast of Ireland, what precautions has his Department taken to protect the coastline of Down and Antrim. (AQW 5445/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In relation to the oil spill off the south coast of Ireland, computer modelling has been carried out which has shown that there is no predicted impact for the Northern Ireland coastline. Contact will be maintained with the relevant authorities to keep the situation under review.

Oil Plume

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment in relation to the oil plume off the east coast of Ireland, what are the risks to wildlife and marine habitats, in the (i) short term; and (ii) long-term, including Dundrum Bay Newcastle. (AQW 5447/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Computer modelling of the oil spill off the south coast of Ireland has been carried out and current predictions show that there is no perceived risk to wildlife and marine habitats in Northern Ireland. The situation will be kept under review by the relevant authorities.

Act on CO2 Campaign

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why he stopped a UK government TV advert from being broadcast; and if the topic of the advert was a devolved matter. (AQW 5483/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Environmental protection and climate change issues are transferred matters and I consider that, for transferred matters, Northern Ireland Ministers should have the right to decide how to promote Government policy. My decision not to use the Act on CO2 campaign was based on this

fundamental constitutional principle. Communication on a transferred matter is the responsibility of the devolved Minister.

Planning Service

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of the Environment in relation to the Planning Service Management Board's referral process from Councils, (i) what was its policy for conducting meetings with; and (ii) to detail the meetings with, (a) applicants; (b) agents; (c) opponents; and (d) interested parties, to discuss planning applications, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5485/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Management Board Referral process is part of the consultation arrangements operated for Councils in considering the Department's preliminary opinion on the outcome of planning applications. The Council as part of the process is afforded the option of a meeting.

Third party attendance at any meeting with a representative of the Management Board or other Headquarters staff is only agreed if this forms part of the Council delegation.

My Department does not record centrally the number of meetings held in relation to MBRs. This could only be provided by a manual check of a large number of files at a disproportionate time and cost and could not be provided within the timescale requested.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Programme for Government Targets

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what risk assessment he has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4827/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The Department has lead responsibility for targets within PSA 11 Driving Investment and Sustainable Development, PSA 20 Improving Public Services and PSA 21 Enabling Efficient Government. The Department has a 'Policy and Framework for Risk Management' in place which describes the process for identifying and managing risk within the Department. The PSA targets for which the Department is directly responsible are subject to ongoing risk assessment and, where appropriate, risks are reflected in the Department's Corporate Risk Register.

Risks are managed at three levels; Corporate (DFP), Directorate (Business Area) and Divisional level.

Programme and project risks also exist and will usually be managed within the methodology used to manage the Programme or Project by way of a project management methodology, for example, PRINCE2 and Gateway process.

Where a risk owner identifies a high level risk which could have a major impact on the Department's business objectives these risks are managed primarily by the Departmental Board in conjunction with Core Directors and Agency Chief Executives, and are subject to challenge by the Departmental Audit and Risk Committee.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of employees in (a) his Department; and (b) the Civil Service, that have disabilities. (AQW 5068/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by Central Personnel Group (CPG) in the Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all departments.

The purpose of collecting disability information is to enable the NICS to monitor the effectiveness of NICS equality and personnel policies. Because these are corporate policies it is appropriate that they are monitored centrally by CPG looking at the Service as a whole. The further processing of NICS monitoring information at the level of department, directorate or location would not be consistent with Data Protection principles.

Information on disability in the NICS is collected by means of a voluntary declaration by applicants and staff. At 1 October 2008, 1385 NICS staff declared that they had a disability. This represents 5.5% of those who completed the declaration.

Section 75 Training for Departmental Staff

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how many; and (ii) what percentage of his departmental staff have received formal training on Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. (AQW 5176/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: 3395 staff (100%) have received either e-learning, on the job training, literature based training or a mixture of all of the above.

In addition, approximately 526 staff have received classroom based section 75 specific training. This represents 15.5% of staff.

A further 36 staff (just over 1 %) have received policy making training in the newly formed Centre for Applied Learning.

Reduction of Rates

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if there are any provisions for a reduction of rates for families that provide a 'granny flat' for elderly parents. (AQW 5181/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is currently no specific rates relief scheme for families that provide a 'granny flat' for elderly relatives.

The issue of rates relief for 'granny flats' is not one that emerged in any of the consultations carried out during the rating reviews and I have no plans to introduce a specific scheme at this time.

Workplace 2010

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans his Department has to accommodate Civil Service staff in view of the suspension of Workplace 2010. (AQW 5382/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department remains committed to the original objectives of Workplace 2010 to provide modern, fit for purpose office accommodation. Although the Workplace 2010 PFI procurement has now been terminated we are considering alternative ways to deliver the new workplace environment. A number of procurement routes could be used ranging from conventional procurement through to more modern partnership agreements. Until alternative procurements are approved, civil servants will be accommodated in the normal way by the Department's Properties Division.

Workplace 2010

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when his Department was made aware of the potential merger of the two companies bidding for the Workplace 2010 project. (AQW 5383/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department was informed of Telereal's interest in purchasing LS Trillium in late April 2008.

Following receipt of this information the Department sought to accelerate the bid receipt and evaluation timetable with a view to having commitment letters signed in July 2008. This would have allowed a preferred bidder to be announced in advance of any potential merger taking place. The accelerated evaluation process was successfully completed on time however neither bid was in a form that was acceptable to the Department and both required further negotiation. These negotiations began in July.

In early August Telereal had withdrawn their bid for LS Trillium and there was increased press speculation that Trillium would be sold to the Qatari Investment Authority.

In late September Telereal re-entered negotiations for the purchase of Trillium and were confirmed as being in exclusive talks with Land Securities by mid-October.

The Workplace 2010 procurement was suspended on 31 October 2008.

Workplace 2010

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail why the Workplace 2010 project has been suspended. (AQW 5384/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Procurement activity for the Workplace 2010 contract was suspended on 31 October 2008 as a result of continuing speculation that both Workplace 2010 Bidders could come under common ownership. Additionally, the Department was keen to use the suspension to assess the impact of the changes in the property and credit markets taking place at that time.

On 20 February 2009, my Department announced that the Workplace 2010 had been terminated. This occurred when the two final bidders, Telereal and Trillium, wrote to the Department formally withdrawing their bids. They did so mainly because of the difficulty in obtaining debt finance for this type of transaction, and also because of the well publicised decline in UK property market conditions, including of course the NICS office estate.

Workplace 2010

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which companies received payments for consultancy work in relation to the Workplace 2010 proposals. (AQW 5385/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The following companies received payments for consultancy work in relation to the Workplace 2010 procurement:

Deloitte

Lovells

Drivers Jonas

Gleeds

DEGW

L'Estrange & Brett

Osborne King

Future @ Work

BIC Systems

Delta RAC Design

EC Harris LLP

Construction Industry Co

PA Consulting

OGC Accounting Services

Partnerships UK

Denise Wheatley Associates

Evolve

Goldblatt McGuigan

Pentagon Solutions

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of his current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to his Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5403/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My December Monitoring Statement made clear the need to prioritise resources towards alleviating cost burdens on local households and businesses. Such re-prioritisation of resources has allowed me to introduce rate reliefs, financial assistance to fuel poor households and accelerated capital spending to assist the struggling local construction sector.

I will continue to ensure that resource allocation decisions are focussed on addressing the adverse effects of the economic downturn. I am also determined to ensure that public sector interventions assist in improving our competitiveness, which will allow us to take advantage when global economic conditions improve.

Workplace 2010

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much was spent by his Department on consultancy fees for the Workplace 2010 project. (AQW 5458/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP incurred costs of £8.16m on legal, commercial, financial and technical consultancy and other professional fees in relation to the Workplace 2010 procurement. These costs were incurred over a 4 year period from 2005 to present.

Approximately 45% of this work remains of value to the Department.

Workplace 2010

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel on what date was a review initiated on Workplace 2010; and when are the recommendations expected. (AQW 5473/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A review of the Workplace 2010 procurement was initiated following the suspension of the procurement process on 31st October 2008.

This review culminated in the announcement of the termination of the procurement on 20th February 2009.

Equity Release Scheme

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what the date was of; and (ii) who participated in, the discussion, about the suggestion of an 'Equity Release Scheme', with the UK Treasury Department. (AQW 5506/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As part of its role in terms of the management of public expenditure on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive there is regular and ongoing engagement between officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury regarding a wide range of issues.

Although it was felt that submitting this proposal at a formal meeting with the Treasury would not be appropriate, it has been raised as part of informal discussions between officials. In response, Treasury officials have clearly indicated that the proposed scheme would not be acceptable to the Treasury.

European Grant Moneys

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what impact the clawback of European grant moneys, distributed by various Departments, will have on future EU funding to Departments. (AQO 2151/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The decommitments or clawback of Northern Ireland EU funding currently being proposed by the European Commission are in respect of the 1994-99 Programmes. I would emphasise that the amounts published by the European Commission late last year remain under discussion and

I would expect them to be significantly reduced. Under the public expenditure rules that apply for the 1994-99 period there would be no impact on future EU funding to Northern Ireland departments.

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what work is being undertaken by the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit and what work is planned. (AQO 2152/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Following the successful completion of the delivery review of Planning Service in November 2008, it was agreed that a meeting should be arranged in April to allow myself and Minister Wilson to be briefed on both the progress and the impact of the Action Plan's implementation. It was also agreed that, in the interim, PEDU would make a follow up visit during February to assess the progress to date on the implementation of the action plan produced by Planning Service. Currently PEDU are undertaking this follow up – the purpose of which is to help maintain momentum and urgency around the implementation of improvements to the service's performance.

PEDU also continues to lead my Department's work on the establishment of a robust Performance Management and Monitoring system, to drive the delivery of the commitments and targets that the Departments signed up to when they secured funding in the budget. A further round of PSA monitoring has just taken place and the Unit will be making an assessment of progress to date – if necessary highlighting any areas where there is emerging evidence of potential delivery problems.

Capital Projects

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many capital projects will now proceed outside the framework agreements and to provide the total value of these projects. (AQO 2153/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In my statement to the Assembly on 15 December 2008 I announced that no construction projects will be stopped due to the legal proceedings into the use of framework agreements by the Central Procurement Directorate and the Department of Education.

As a result of this, 22 projects worth a total value in excess of £115m, scheduled to be delivered by the framework agreements, will go to the market place on a project-by-project basis before the end of this financial year. These include Lurgan and Portadown Public Realm project at £7.8m and 10 schools including St Colman's Primary School Lambeg and Magherfelt Primary School.

As you are aware, the legal cases against the Central Procurement Directorate and Department of Education frameworks agreements are on-going. Until such times as the legal proceedings are concluded, Department of Education projects and those for which the Central Procurement Directorate acts as the Centre of Procurement Expertise, will continue to be delivered on a project-by-project basis.

Those Departments not affected by the legal challenges will continue to deliver projects through use of their established procurement strategies.

Northern Ireland Economic Strategy

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the draft Northern Ireland Economic Strategy. (AQO 2154/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Obviously the economy is in a state of significant turmoil at this time. Therefore it is important to differentiate between short term policy responses to the downturn, such as those announced by the Executive in December, and the need for a longer term, more strategic economic plan for Northern Ireland.

Work is continuing on developing this longer term plan. This work will embrace key work-streams underway in other departments with an important influence on economic development.

One important example of this is the strategic review of economic development policy announced by my colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. This particular review, led by Professor Richard Barnett, will include an assessment of the functions of Invest NI, which clearly has a central role to play in our

longer-term economic plan. It would be rather foolish to rush ahead with an economic masterplan that did not factor in the findings of this key DETI study.

Scotland and Wales: Minister's Counterparts

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had, or intends to have, with his counterparts in Scotland and Wales. (AQO 2155/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have recently met with my counterparts from Scotland and Wales on 21 January 2009, when we discussed a broad range of issues including the response to date by our respective administrations to the downturn in economic conditions.

It was clear that there is a significant degree of commonality in the actions taken to date to alleviate hardship for those worst affected by the downturn.

Arrangements are currently being put in place for a UK Finance Ministers Quadrilateral with the three Devolved Administrations and the Treasury, which will provide a further opportunity to discuss matters of common concern.

Workplace 2010

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment as to whether the problems identified in the public procurement process for the Workplace 2010 private finance initiative (PFI) demonstrate inherent weaknesses in PFI policy in relation to public sector projects. (AQO 2156/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The problems for the Workplace 2010 procurement are not due to an inherent weakness in PFI policy. They are simply the result of a significant decline in property prices, including the value of the NICS office estate, as well as the unprecedented global financial turmoil, which has made it very difficult for bidders to secure funding for property-related PFI deals. The Executive is committed to managing this impact and ensuring that the taxpayer always achieves value for money by using the most appropriate procurement route for each individual project. .

Rating Pressures

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he has taken to address the financial difficulties being faced by district councils due to rating pressures. (AQO 2157/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have already announced a package of assistance for councils. This will be worth up to £8m in the next financial year and comprises three key elements. It will allow councils, where they are in a general repayment situation, to offset this amount through staging any repayments arising from reductions in British Telecom and Ministry of Defence valuations over five years. This will result in a benefit for all councils of up to £3.3m next year.

The way in which councils net revenues are calculated will also be changed, providing a benefit of up to £4m. The 3% cost attributable to housing benefit will be removed. I will also reduce the impact of the landlord allowance on councils, for Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties, for two years, pending a review of this allowance prior to the introduction of the rating of empty homes.

Finally, there will be a one off reduction in the cost of collection to ensure that some of the additional costs associated with the development of new IT systems are not passed on to councils.

I believe that this package, of up to £8m, is a proportionate and affordable response to the financial difficulties that some councils are experiencing at this time. Indeed, it has enabled councils to strike much lower rates than would otherwise have been the case. As you will no doubt be aware many councils have been able to strike rate increases at 5% or below. The effect of the regional rate freeze will be halve these increases, for both households and businesses, meaning that rate bill increases for many will be much lower.

Land and Property Services

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he will take to increase co-operation between the Land and Property Services and local councils. (AQO 2158/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land & Property Services works closely with local councils, recognising that councils are a key stakeholder for the Agency. The overall relationship is managed by a Strategic Steering Group that includes representatives of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, the Association of Local Government Finance Officers, Building Control Officers, IT Officers and the Rating Policy Division of DFP.

A number of other, more specific, liaison arrangements also exist, for instance a Penny Product Working Group involving Land & Property Services, the Association of Local Government Finance Officers, DFP Rating Policy Division and Local Government Policy Division of the Department of the Environment. This group was set up in 2007 and meets on a regular basis to discuss issues connected with the Penny Product.

Current issues being progressed between local councils and Land & Property Services include the maintenance and improvement of Pointer, the definitive address database for Northern Ireland; the inspection exercise of vacant properties; and further refinement of the process of estimating and calculating the rating Penny Product. Land & Property Services also continues to provide a comprehensive property valuation service which includes asset valuations, rental, acquisitions, and general property advice to the majority of councils.

In addition, a wide range of specific questions are also raised and resolved between local councils and Land & Property Services on a daily basis.

Fiscal Stimulus

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the fiscal stimulus offered by the Executive in comparison to initiatives being taken in other UK regions. (AQO 2159/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive announced a range of measures in December to help alleviate some of the economic pressures confronting the local economy. While we have few fiscal instruments at our discretion, we must seek to utilise all our available powers to reduce living cost pressures confronting households and businesses. That is why the Executive agreed a range of measures such as rate reliefs, financial assistance to fuel poor households and accelerated capital spending to assist the struggling local construction sector.

When I met recently with the Scottish and Welsh finance ministers to discuss the economic downturn, it was clear that our individual policy responses were very similar in nature. The key priority across our regions was to alleviate living cost pressures and boost capital spending.

Vacant Properties

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many vacant properties have been identified as being occupied; and how many of these have been sent bills. (AQO 2161/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land & Property Services is working in partnership with local authorities to inspect properties recorded as vacant, or with insufficient ratepayer details, and to confirm the current occupancy status of each. To date just over 50,000 inspection forms have been returned by local councils. Of these, 13,000 confirmed the property as vacant, 3,500 contained full information for raising a bill, 6,500 required follow up action such as a valuation adjustment, and 27,000 required further information before a bill could be issued.

Land & Property Services has, at 11 February 2009, issued 5,796 rate bills as a result of the vacancy inspection exercise, with a total value of £8.9 million. The Agency has applied more than 25 staff to completing the exercise, with the key focus at the moment being gathering the missing information required before a bill can be issued.

It is important to stress that no money has been lost to Councils or the Executive as a result of the backlog of vacancy inspections – Land & Property Services will ensure that bills are raised for all occupied properties that were recorded as vacant, and will pursue payment of the rates due.

Land and Property Services

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the collection of outstanding rates by Land and Property Services distinguishing between amounts arising from the current year and from previous years. (AQO 2162/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 8 February 2009 the ratepayer debt of £124 million at 31 March 2008 had been reduced to £62 million. Between 1 April 2008 and 31 December 2008, Land & Property Services continued to pursue this debt, and also the in-year ratepayer arrears, and issued:

- 114,000 final notices;
- 42,000 court processes, and
- 11,824 Notices of Intention to Enforce Debt.

Land & Property Services continues to pursue ratepayers for all outstanding ratepayer debt, including in-year ratepayer arrears, while at the same time seeking to agree payment arrangements with individuals who are encountering difficulties in making payments and ensuring that they have taken up any benefits and reliefs to which they are entitled.

It is difficult to quantify in-year ratepayer rate arrears given that – as part of normal activity – bills are issued on a daily basis. Arrears for the 2008-09 year will therefore not be known with certainty until the Statement of Rate Levy and Collection is completed in May 2009.

The collection of all ratepayer debt remains a very high priority area of work for Land & Property Services. The Agency, however, recognises that the current economic climate makes debt recovery more demanding.

Economic Downturn

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has held with HM Treasury in relation to raising additional finance to help combat the economic downturn. (AQO 2163/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have regular discussions with Treasury Ministers on a range of finance issues affecting Northern Ireland. During these discussions I have continually impressed upon them the need to ensure that we receive our appropriate share of all public expenditure measures related to the economic downturn. I have also stressed the need to ensure that the various assistance packages announced recently apply fully to Northern Ireland. This is particularly important with respect to our local banks, which need to participate fully in proactively assisting our local businesses in terms of greater liquidity, cashflow and export credit insurance.

Land and Property Services

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the method by which the Land and Property Services is collecting rate arrears. (AQO 2164/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services is responsible for collecting rate income which, as members will be aware, is vital for the funding of local council and Executive activity. It is important that each rate payer contributes in an equitable manner to the cost of these services. Land & Property Services is responsible for the operation of the valuation and rate collection process, including the recovery of debt and administration of a range of reliefs and benefits.

Land & Property Services provides rate payers with a number of opportunities to pay their rate bills, or to put in place a mutually-agreeable payment arrangement. If payment, or a payment arrangement, is not forthcoming, Land & Property Services will use the court process to attempt to collect the debt, or to enforce the judgement of the Court against the rate payer.

A final demand is sent 35 days after issue of a rate bill. If no contact is received from the rate payer within 10 days, Land & Property Services will commence court proceedings. Rate payers can stop the process by paying – or agreeing a payment arrangement – at any time prior to the Court hearing and, in line with normal Court proceedings, can contest the case and appeal the verdict of the Court. If a decree is awarded in favour of Land & Property Services by the Court, a Notice of Intention to Enforce the Debt will be issued, and Land & Property Services will then pass the matter to the Enforcement of Judgements office.

The process differs slightly if a rate payer pays by direct debit. The Finance and Personnel Committee of this Assembly has been provided with a detailed flowchart of the processes that apply.

Rates Arrears

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact of the recession on the reduction of rate arrears. (AQO 2165/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 8 February 2009 the ratepayer debt of £124 million at 31 March 2008 had been reduced to £62 million. The profile of the collection of this debt over the course of 2008 makes interesting reading – there is a steady decline in the collection of the debt outstanding at 31 March, from 8.2% in April to 3.0% in December. There is no doubt that the recession is making the reduction of ratepayer arrears more difficult.

A number of businesses have been affected by the economic situation and have entered into administration. The annual rates bills of Woolworths, Land of Leather and MFI combined are – or perhaps I should say were – £1.64 million. LPS therefore expects to write off £5 million of rating debt in 2008-09, considerably more than in previous years. Land & Property Services writes debt off only after exploring all possible avenues for recovering the money.

Land & Property Services will continue robustly to pursue the recovery of all rating debt.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Service Dental Treatment

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why people who have served in the armed forces are deemed to have broken their Health Service agreement with their dentist. (AQW 657/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): A continuing care arrangement (e.g. registration with a dentist) lapses after a 15 month period where the patient has not seen the dentist. Members or ex-members of the armed forces are not automatically deemed to have broken their health service agreement with their dentist. However, the 15 month registration period may be an issue for military reservists whose deployment abroad means that they will not have attended their dentist within the relevant 15 month period. I am entirely sympathetic to the problems faced by those who have been absent serving their country, and who encounter such difficulties on returning home.

I propose to take measures to increase the registration period from 15 months to 24 months, not just for soldiers but for all members of the community. I am confident that this will help to address the issues raised.

In the meantime, any members of the armed forces returning to civilian life in Northern Ireland who encounter difficulties in registering with a dentist should contact the Dental Department in the relevant Health and Social Services Board, explaining their situation. The Board will be glad to offer advice and assistance wherever possible.

Health Service Dental Treatment

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how people retiring from the armed forces and returning to civilian life can avail of Health Service dental treatment. (AQW 658/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am wholly sympathetic to the range of issues facing people retiring from the armed forces. Access to health service dental treatment has become more problematic in recent years for all members of the community in certain parts of Northern Ireland, and not just retired service personnel.

In my view the resolution to this problem for all members of the community is to improve access generally to health service dentistry. In this regard my Department is taking all necessary steps to increase health service provision in the most expedient ways possible.

Negotiations are currently taking place between officials and the Dental Practice Committee of the British Dental Association on a new contract for Northern Ireland, which we hope will ensure increased health service access. In addition, I have authorised tender action which will increase the number of dentists providing health service dentistry. I expect a contract to be awarded by the Spring, and expect to see additional dentists, in those areas where we currently have access difficulties, by the Autumn.

In the meantime, any members of the armed forces returning to civilian life in Northern Ireland who encounter difficulties in registering with a dentist should contact the Dental Department in the relevant Health and Social Services Board. The Board will be glad to offer advice and assistance wherever possible.

Hospital Travel Cost Scheme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have benefited from the Hospital Travel Cost Scheme, broken down by Health and Social Care Trusts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4941/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The systems operated in Trust facilities do not hold the information in the format requested.

The information asked for could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Hospital Travel Cost Scheme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to review the Hospital Travel Cost Scheme to include patients with cancer. (AQW 4942/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Hospital Travel Cost Scheme is entirely income based and help from that scheme is available to those on specified social security benefits or on low income. Similar schemes operate in England, Scotland and Wales.

As assistance with the cost of travel to hospital appointments is available to the vast majority of those people who need it, I have no plans to review the current scheme.

In May last year, in recognition of the need for cancer patients to attend frequently for chemotherapy or radiotherapy I announced that these patients will not pay car parking fees

Health and Social Care Trust Staff: Sick Days

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to break down by Health and Social Care Trust how many sick days were taken by his staff in the last financial year. (AQW 4965/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on number of sick days taken by HSC staff is not collected centrally and has therefore been supplied by individual Health and Social Care Trusts.

Health and Social Care Trust	Number of sick days 07/08
Northern	146,655
Southern	113,198
South Eastern	140,720
Belfast	283,888
Western	123,700
NI Ambulance Service*	n/a

* As NI Ambulance operates a 24 hour service, sickness absence data is captured as 'hours lost' rather than 'days'. The total hours lost for the same period above was 162258.51

My Department monitors sickness absence rates in HSC Trusts on a bi-annual basis and I have set a target for reduction in sickness absence in my 'Priorities for Action 2008/09'. Each Trust should ensure that, during 2008-09, levels of absenteeism are reduced to 10% below average 2007-08 levels, working towards a regional target of 5.2% in 2010-11.

Health and Social Care Trust Staff: Number of

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people work for each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4966/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of staff employed by Health and Social Care Trust can be found in the latest Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Key Facts Workforce Bulletin as at 31st December 2008, which is on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/key_facts_workforce_bulletin_dec_2008_web.pdf

Health and Social Care Trust Staff: Salaries of

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent on salaries in each Health and Social Care Trust, over the last financial year. (AQW 4967/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The requested information is provided in the table below:

TABLE 1: STAFF COSTS BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST (1 APRIL 2007 – 31 MARCH 2008)

HSC Organisation	Cost (£)
Belfast HSC Trust	584,317,897
Northern HSC Trust	300,177,532
South Eastern HSC Trust	232,509,195
Southern HSC Trust	250,762,751
Western HSC Trust	253,794,676
Regional Services & Board HQ	106,847,156
Total	1,728,409,207

Source: Quarterly Cost Analysis (QCA) – March 2008

Notes:

1. These cost figures include costs for Bank staff (who are normally removed from published Human Resource Management System (HRMS) workforce figures due to the variable nature of their employment). The costs of other staff who may have left the Health service during the year will also be included. It would not, therefore, be appropriate to compare these costs with published, point-in-time, staffing data from HRMS.
2. Figures in the QCA are derived from Organisations' payroll systems and are centrally collated by Directorate of Information Systems (DIS).
3. The cost of staff is the total employees' gross taxable pay plus employers' National Insurance and Superannuation contributions. Items which are not reckonable for Income Tax have been excluded, for example, travelling expenses, subsistence, uniform allowances, since they are not charged to payroll headings despite the payroll system being used to effect payment.

A&E Departments

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were treated for knife wounds, at each A&E Department, in each of the past five years. (AQW 4976/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people treated for knife wounds at each A&E Department in each of the last five years is unavailable.

MEPs: Meetings with

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many meetings he has had with each of the three MEPs from 2007 to date. (AQW 4981/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can advise that since taking up office on 8 May 2007 I have not held any departmental meetings with any of the MEPs.

Translation Services

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what was the total cost incurred by (i) his Department (ii) General Practitioners and hospitals; and the hourly rate paid to interpreters, for translation services for residents from foreign countries, in each of the last two financial years. (AQW 5022/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department funds the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Interpreting Service at a cost of £164,000 per year. In addition, it spent £12,908 in 2006/07 and £4,351 in 2007/08 on Departmental translation services for ethnic minority languages.

Information relating to the specific cost of translation services for general practitioners and hospitals is not available.

The hourly rate for interpreters engaged by the Health and Social Care Interpreting Service is £25 for the first hour and £20 per hour thereafter. Where external interpreting services need to be engaged (for example because of demand), higher charges can apply. No average rate is available.

Genito-Urinary Medicine Clinics

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people used the Genito-Urinary Medicine clinics, broken down by month, over the last five years. (AQW 5060/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who use GUM clinics is not collected monthly. Outpatient attendances at GUM clinics in Health and Social Care hospitals in Northern Ireland for each quarter in the last five years are shown in the table below.

Quarter Ending	New Outpatient Attendances	Review Outpatient Attendances	Total Outpatient Attendances
30-Jun-03	2,950	3,408	6,358
30-Sep-03	2,910	3,482	6,392
31-Dec-03	2,976	3,339	6,315
31-Mar-04	2,900	3,634	6,534
30-Jun-04	2,703	3,724	6,427
30-Sep-04	2,914	3,144	6,058
31-Dec-04	2,904	3,726	6,630
31-Mar-05	3,521	3,201	6,722
30-Jun-05	3,799	3,223	7,022
30-Sep-05	3,625	2,601	6,226
31-Dec-05	3,653	2,752	6,405
31-Mar-06	3,658	2,682	6,340
30-Jun-06	3,849	2,760	6,609
30-Sep-06	2,851	2,552	5,403
31-Dec-06	2,960	2,602	5,562
31-Mar-07	2,972	2,352	5,324

Quarter Ending	New Outpatient Attendances	Review Outpatient Attendances	Total Outpatient Attendances
30-Jun-07	3,077	2,411	5,488
30-Sep-07	3,337	2,163	5,500
31-Dec-07	3,171	2,387	5,558
31-Mar-08	3,529	2,693	6,222

Source: Departmental KH09 (Part 1) Return

Nursing Staff

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the proposed reduction in nursing staff in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 5065/09)

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 recent months each of the Trusts have been consulting 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.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of employees in his Department that have disabilities. (AQW 5071/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by the Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all NICS Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the amount of funding; and (ii) the name of groups that have received funding, from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5078/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The amount of funding provided by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to voluntary and community groups, senior citizen groups and playgroups during 2007/2008 totalled £6,688,737.

A list of the groups that received funding during 2007/2008 and the amount of grant aided is attached.

NHSCT GRANTS TO VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY GROUPS

	£
Accord - Belfast	12,838
Action Mental Health	219,313
Alzheimer's Disease Society	6,959
Autism Initiative	16,075
Barnardo's - Leaving Care	77,101
Barnardo's - Special Support	51,996

	£
Barnardo's - Young Carers	75,152
Blind Centre	64,368
Bridge Association	222,875
Carlisle House	192,071
Chest, Heart & Stroke Association	17,640
Childline N.I.	37,348
Cruse Bereavement Care N.I.	16,705
Disability Action	55,126
Extern Organisation	1,063,322
Family Care Society	11,038
Family Caring Centre - Children's sponsored placements	22,215
Family Caring Centre - Mental Health	69,055
Give and Take Scheme	54,151
Homestart (Antrim)	47,753
Homestart (Carrickfergus)	49,672
NCH Parental	167,278
Marie Curie (Cancer patients)	106,705
Marie Curie (Non-cancer patients)	23,413
N.I.A.M.H.	433,383
N.I.A.M.H. CBT Waiting List Initiatives	30,000
N.I.C.O.D. The Cedar Foundation	90,742
N.I.P.P.A.	64,454
N.I Hospice	300,727
Northlands	24,606
N.S.P.C.C.	114,730
Praxis	1,251,908
Positive Futures	145,787
Rehability	82,521
Rethink	161,511
Rethink - Magherafelt Training & Employment Scheme	42,120
Sense - Manor Nursery	23,194
Triangle Women's Association	231,404
Waveney Association	8,850

	£
Women's Aid Cookstown	42,070
Women's Aid Ballymena	56,933
Alzheimer's Disease Society - Belfast	19,640
ASBAH (NI)	4,428
RNIB	42,860
Compass Advocacy	64,864
NIAMH - Shiels Court Ballymoney	148,625
Harpurs Hill Community Early Years Project	129,220
Fairways Woodward Park	161,609
Dalriada Surestart	81,001
Cedar Foundation	50,773
Chest, Heart & Stroke Association	10,506
Triangle Housing Association	3,000
Causeway Womens Aid - Coleraine	40,918
Age Concern	3,000
Homestart - Causeway	17,920
YMCA - Larne	65,233
Voluntary and Community Groups	6,628,706

SENIOR CITIZENS GROUPS

	£
Age Concern, Cookstown	8,359
Antrim Retirement Group	443
Ballymena Retirement Group	390
Carnmoney Old Peoples Club	106
Glengormley Thursday Together Club	135
Kells & Connor Luncheon Club	229
Larne Retirement Association	208
Mossley Senior Citizens Club	73
Monkstown Churches Joint Committee	468
Seven Towers Senior Citizens Club	178
St.Comgall's Senior Citizens Club	246
Still Active Club, St. Patricks Church, Ballymena	85
Templepatrick Retirement Group (NI)	288

	£
Toome & District Senior Citizens Club	300
Toberdoney Recreation Club	99
Castlerock Senior Citizens Club	222
Macosquin Senior Citizens Club	512
Rathain Fold	126
Cramsie Crew Group	81
Articlave Young At Heart	261
Age Concern (Coleraine)	5,658
Senior Citizens Groups	18,466

PLAY GROUPS

	£
Abbey Mother & Toddler Group	480
Ahoghill Community Playgroup	563
Alphabet Playgroup	563
Ballee Pre-School Playgroup	1,125
Ballee Presbyterian Church, Mothers and Toddlers	184
Ballinascreen Playgroup	1,350
Ballycarry Playgroup	567
Ballyhenry Presbyterian Church Parent & Toddler Group	248
Ballyloughan Parent & Toddler Group	486
Banana Bunch Playgroup	563
Beacon Playgroup	540
Bright Buttons Playgroup	563
Brookside Presbyterian Church Parent & Toddler Association	104
Broughshane Centre of Early Learning	562
Buddies & Bundles Parent & Toddler Group	563
Carlisle Hall Pre-School Playgroup	338
Carrickfergus Childminders Drop In Centre	351
Covenant Christian School Playgroup	563
First Larne Mother & Toddler Group	176
Galgorm & Gracehill Community Playgroup	585
Glenarm Community Playgroup	563
Glengormley Free Methodist Carers & Toddlers Group	248

	£
Glengormley Integrated Primary School Playgroup	563
Glenravel Community Playgroup	585
Greengables Playgroup,Carrickfergus	518
Greenlough Playgroup	936
Hansel & Gretel Playgroup, Glynn	563
Happytots Comunity Playgroup	585
Harbour Bears Playgroup	563
Harryville Parent & Toddler Group	185
Hillside Pre-School Playgroup (Y.E. 30.11.06 also)	1,125
Jack & Jill Playgroup	563
Kilbride playgroup	563
Kirkinriola Early Years Playgroup	540
Lissan Cross Community Playgroup	756
Longstone Community Playgroup	405
Mallusk Community Playgroup	450
Monkstown Community School Playgroup	563
Mulberry Bush Playgroup	563
Naionra Ghleann Darach	450
Noah's Ark Parent and Toddler Group	720
Playtots Mother & Toddler Group	189
Portglenone Community Playgroup	540
Rainbow Club Cairncastle Pres. Church	180
Randalstown Parent/Toddler Group	468
Randalstown Community Playgroup	563
St.Bernards Pre-School Playgroup	563
St.Mary's on The Hill Pre-School Playgroup	563
Slievegallion Playgroup	585
Taylorstown Community Playgroup	563
Tiny Tots Parent and Toddler Group,Cullybackey	157
Tiny Tots Playgroup,Kells and Conor	765
Tir Na Nog Ballyclare	563
Whitehead Tiny Tots Parent & Toddler Group	180
Woodburn Playgroup	563

	£
Ballymoney & District Community Playgroup	882
Ballymoney Tea & Tots	117
Stepping Stones Playgroup / Coleraine	2,160
Wattfun Community Playgroup	563
Dervock Community Playgroup	540
Jack Horner Community Playgroup	540
Kilrea Community Playgroup	585
Macosquin Community Playgroup	495
See Saw Community Playgroup	585
Rasharkin Community Playgroup	338
Ballywillan Mother & Toddler Group	180
Crows Nest Community Playgroup	473
Brookvale Community Playgroup	585
Aghadowey Pre-School Playgroup	518
Castlerock Community Playgroup	563
Garvagh Community Playgroup	1,260
Cloughmills Community Playgroup	563
Dunloy Community Playgroup	360
St Colums Pre-School Playgroup	540
Ballysally Community Playgroup	450
Mother Goose Community Playgroup	360
Sub-total- Playgroups	41,565

999 Calls

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will pursue prosecutions of individuals who abuse 999 calls to the (i) Fire Brigade; or (ii) Ambulance Service. (AQW 5106/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The prosecution of those who abuse 999 calls is a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses specialising in inflammatory bowel disease are there in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5118/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Whilst there are nurses with an interest in Inflammatory Bowel Disease employed by the Health & Social Care Trusts, there are no “specialist” nurses specifically with this remit. As part of some nurse-led clinics, Inflammatory Bowel Disease patients would be reviewed, but these would not be specific Inflammatory Bowel Disease clinics.

Gastroenterology Departments

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many dietitians are there in gastroenterology departments. (AQW 5119/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trusts have advised that there are currently 6 (2.15 whole-time equivalent) Dietitians employed specifically within their Gastroenterology Departments. Additionally, there are many more core service Dietitians who assess and advise patients with gastroenterological conditions as part of their overall medical and surgical caseload.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has been made of the adequacy of services for inflammatory bowel disease. (AQW 5120/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has not carried out an assessment of services for people with inflammatory bowel disease. Treatment, support and advice may be provided by GPs, dieticians and hospital specialists, and will vary depending on which type of inflammatory bowel disease a patient is suffering from and the severity of their individual condition.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people suffer from inflammatory bowel disease. (AQW 5121/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people who suffer from inflammatory bowel disease is unavailable.

Health Warnings on Alcohol Products

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of placing health warnings on alcohol products similar to those on tobacco. (AQW 5134/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department fully supports the voluntary labelling agreement between the UK Government and the alcohol industry. Through this agreement all alcoholic containers should contain the following key messages:

- the 'Know Your Limits' slogan or agreed alternative;
- icon showing alcohol unit content;
- the sensible drinking guidelines;
- advice on alcohol and pregnancy; and
- the Drinkaware web address.

These health messages are appropriate to the nature and level of harm associated with alcohol, which cannot be directly compared to tobacco.

I understand that a review is currently underway to establish the extent to which the alcohol industry is complying with this agreement. If this monitoring process shows that there is not significant pace of movement towards compliance, then further consideration should be given to UK wide legislation on this issue.

Slieve Roe Residential Home, Kilkeel

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people applied for a place; and (ii) how many applications were granted for places, in Slieve Roe Residential Home, Kilkeel, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5162/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The number of applications for places in Slieve Roe Residential Home in each of the last three years was as follows:

Year	Applications for Places
2006	7
2007	8
2008	0

- (ii) The number of applications granted for places in Slieve Roe Residential Home in each of the last three years was as follows:

Year	Applications Granted
2006	2
2007	4*
2008	0

* Two of the four applications granted during 2007 were to clients who applied to Slieve Roe in 2006 but were initially placed in another home and then subsequently transferred to Slieve Roe during 2007 when places became available.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis Services

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will he publish his plans for Myalgic Encephalomyelitis services. (AQW 5168/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Review of Adult Neurology Services in Northern Ireland (2002) and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) clinical guidelines currently form the basis for the Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) service provision here. In January 2008, my Department endorsed the NICE clinical guidelines on the diagnosis and management of ME as applicable to Northern Ireland. These guidelines are endorsed as developmental standards, and the Department expects the HSC Trusts to take account of the guidelines in their planning and delivery of services.

In addition, I am investing a total of £4.4m recurrent funding to provide for 70 additional cognitive behavioural therapists to be recruited over the next three years, which, in conjunction with DSD's Welfare Reform Programme, will significantly improve access to this therapy which is a treatment of choice for those suffering from mild to moderate ME.

MRI Scans

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people have been referred to private sector organisations for MRI scans; and (ii) what was the cost, broken down in each Health and Social Care Trust areas, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 5178/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The number of patients that have been referred to private sector providers for MRI scans in each of the last 5 years, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust is outlined in the table below.

HSC Trust	Financial Year				
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Western HSCT	0	165	781	1,091	1,268
Southern HSCT	0	0	0	0	690
South Eastern HSCT	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast HSCT	0	500	0	3,000	500
Northern HSCT1	N/A	N/A	N/A	1222	571

HSC Trust	Financial Year				
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Northern Ireland Total	0	665	781	4,2132	3,029

1. The provision of data on the number of patients referred by the Northern HSC Trust to a private sector provider for a MRI scan prior to December 2006 would incur a disproportionate cost.
2. 2006/07 data for the Northern HSC Trust relates to patients referred to private sector organisations from December 2006 to March 2007.

(ii) The financial information requested is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

MRI Scans

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the capital and revenue costs of providing MRI scanners to the Health Service; and what is the average cost per patient . (AQW 5179/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a wide range of variables that affect the capital and revenue costs of providing of providing MRI scanners and average cost per patient. These can include the specification of the scanner, total throughput of the unit, the body part to be scanned; and whether contrast media is used. In light of these variables I have provided a cost range in response to each element of your question.

The capital cost associated with providing a scanner would typically lie in the range of £600k - £800k.

Revenue costs typically lie in the range of £450k - £600k per annum per scanner.

The average cost per patient ranges from £185 - £670.

Cancer Drug Topotecan

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to make the cancer drug Topotecan available. (AQW 5191/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is currently considering topotecan for the treatment of cervical cancer which has recurred and lung cancer as a second-line treatment; guidance is expected to be published in October and November 2009 respectively. In addition, a review of topotecan as an option for the treatment of second-line or subsequent treatment of ovarian cancer is expected to commence in November 2009.

My Department has established a link with NICE whereby all guidance published by NICE from 1 July 2006 is reviewed locally for its applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, is endorsed by the Department for implementation in Northern Ireland. The NICE guidance on topotecan will be considered under local arrangements when issued.

Pending the issue of guidance to the HSC, the decision on whether to fund a particular treatment is a matter for Health and Social Services Boards. Currently, the drug is available for the treatment of ovarian cancer, but is not commonly used as it is not preferred by some clinicians. The drug is also available to patients in Northern Ireland on a cost per case basis for the treatment of metastatic cervical cancer.

Neonatal Staff

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail which hospitals meet the British Association for Perinatal Medicine's recommendation for one to one specialised nursing for babies in intensive care; what assessment is being made of any risk posed to patients by the shortage of specialised neonatal staff and what action he is taking to tackle this. (AQW 5275/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Each neo-natal unit in Northern Ireland aims to provide the nurse to patient ratios recommended by the British Association of Perinatal Medicine. We acknowledge however that, due to peaks and troughs in demand, this is not always possible. In this respect the position in Northern Ireland is similar situation to that elsewhere in the UK.

Maintaining appropriate neo-natal nurse staffing levels will clearly help manage risks to this patient group. The Department, as part of its workforce planning arrangements, will continue to review the supply and demand of appropriately trained neo-natal nursing staff to meet service needs. A review of the nursing and midwifery workforce has recently been initiated. This will identify any potential recruitment difficulties and indicate where any special initiatives might be necessary.

In 2008/09, £430k recurrent funding was allocated to fund an additional 14 WTE qualified nursing staff.

Residential Homes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his Department's assessment of (i) the language change between the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's document 'Reprovision of the Trust's Residential Homes for Older People' (issued on 8 January 2009) and its document 'Modernisation Proposals Services for Older People Reprovision of Residential Homes' (issued on 19 January 2009); and (ii) the substitution of the word 'close' with the word 'replace' which constitutes a significant change from the original proposals that are subject to consultation; and will he instruct the Trust to withdraw these proposals and terminate the process. (AQW 5300/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust have advised that the document "Modernisation Proposals Services for Older People Reprovision of Residential Homes" was issued to those who attended public consultation meetings and is a summary of the proposals contained in the Trust's consultation document, "Reprovision of the Trust's Residential Homes for Older People". There has been no change to the Trust's proposals and I have not, therefore, asked the Trust to withdraw proposals for the reform and modernisation of older people's services.

Knockbracken Healthcare Centre

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing posts in the Knockbracken Healthcare Centre are currently filled by agency staff. (AQW 5305/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Agency usage fluctuates on a daily basis according to staffing needs, therefore providing figures for a full month gives a more accurate view than figures for just one day.

Belfast HSC Trust has advised that during the month of January 2009 (which they also advise would be generally representative of any given month's usage), a total of 4829 hours of Agency Nursing staff was used on the Knockbracken HealthCare Park site. This equated to 26.10 (Whole-Time Equivalent) Band 2 Nurses and 3.62 (Whole-Time Equivalent) Band 5 Nurses.

Consultation Documents

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department or one of the Health and Social Care Trusts can withdraw a consultation document before the end of the statutory consultation period. (AQW 5336/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A consultation document would only be withdrawn before the end of a public consultation period if the original reason for consultation had been superseded, or where there was a need to correct factual information within the document.

Hillsborough Private Clinic

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services Hillsborough Private Clinic is providing to his Department; and what costs are involved. (AQW 5379/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: From April 2008 to December 2008 Hillsborough Private Clinic treated inpatients and daycases on behalf of Health and Social Care bodies in ENT, General Surgery, Ophthalmology, Oral Surgery, Urology, General Medicine and Gastroenterology.

It would not be appropriate to release details of the costs of one specific Independent Sector provider.

Taughmonagh Primary School

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action the Belfast Health and Social Services Trust is taking to address the situation at Taughmonagh Primary School where children with speech and language difficulties are not receiving therapy; and for his assessment of his Department's legal responsibility for providing this therapy. (AQW 5421/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust advises that it hopes to have a part time Speech and Language Therapist at Taughmonagh Primary School in post within the next 2-3 weeks. The Trust is also actively trying to secure appropriate Speech & Language Therapist resource to cover the current service gap, which has arisen due to sick leave. The Trust will issue a letter to all parents within the next few days detailing the service available, and an action plan including time frames.

My Department is currently working with the Department of Education to develop an action plan to improve speech and language therapy services for children. It is expected that the action plan will be completed by April 2009.

Wet Age Related Macular Degeneration

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the lack of a fully functional optical clinic to treat wet age related macular degeneration patients at Altnagelvin Hospital (i) what pressure this creates for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust clinic; (ii) if it increases waiting lists for treatment; and (iii) if it delays the implementation of full service at both facilities. (AQW 5474/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Both the Belfast and Western Health and Social Care Trusts currently provide wet AMD treatment for those patients of greatest clinical priority.

At the end of December 2008, 20 patients resident in the Western Health and Social Services Board area were receiving treatment with Lucentis for wet AMD at the Belfast Trust. It should be noted that a patient's GP or optometrist may, in consultation with the patient, choose to refer them directly to a Belfast hospital for investigation or treatment. The Western Health and Social Care Trust has advised that no patients with clinical priority have been referred to Belfast because of capacity issues at Altnagelvin.

Both the Belfast and Western Trusts are currently in the process of expanding their existing services to provide treatment for wet AMD in line with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance endorsed by my Department on 21 October 2008.

GP Practices in Coleraine

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why some GP practices in the Coleraine area can admit patients to the Robinson Hospital, Ballymoney for palliative care, while other practices cannot. (AQW 5554/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All GP practices in the Coleraine area may admit patients to the Robinson Hospital for palliative care providing a bed is available. Individual practices may determine, in discussion with the patient, to which hospital they refer the patient.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Hedged Fuel Purchasing Agreement

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4389/09, in which currency these transactions are conducted, and if not pounds sterling, what exchange rates were received for each agreement. (AQW 4934/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Translink have informed me that these arrangements are conducted in sterling.

Fuel Costs

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3742/09, what were the final fuel costs for December 2008. (AQW 4935/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the member to the answer given to AQW 4391/09 on 9 February 2009.

Gritting Services

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the process and criteria used to trigger the gritting of roads. (AQW 5015/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, before a road is considered for addition to the salting schedule it will first assess the volume of traffic on a route during the winter service period, that is, from October to April inclusive. Roads Service will then also consult with Translink and the relevant Education Board to ascertain the number of buses using the route on a daily basis. Buses are given special consideration, in that they are counted according to the number of seats on the bus, regardless of the number of passengers on the bus, for example, a 40-seater bus is counted as 40 vehicles. The total number of seats on the bus is added to the traffic count figures for the road, and from this a 7-day average traffic volume is calculated.

The criterion for inclusion of roads on the gritting schedule is as follows:-

- all Motorways and Trunk roads shall be treated;
- main through routes which carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day shall be treated;
- other busy through routes with special difficulties which carry more than 1,000 vehicles per day shall be considered. Special difficulties which are considered include the severity, frequency and extent of gradients, frequency of bends, the height above sea level, railway level crossings on the road and abnormally high junction frequencies. It should be noted that in relation to this category, consideration will be given to the availability of alternative or parallel routes which are on the treated network. Where such parallel or alternative routes are available, the routes qualifying under this criteria need not necessarily be salted; and
- small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more shall have a salted link to the nearest part of the existing salted network.

Gritting Services

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is considering changing the process and criteria used for triggering the gritting of roads and to provide a more localised and cost effective system. (AQW 5016/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the gritting of rural roads was considered in the 2001 review of its Winter Service procedures. One of the key outcomes of that review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service, on the busier main through routes, should continue.

As a result of the review, the salting schedule has been increased by some 4%, with additional routes being determined by:

- ensuring that small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more should have a salted link to the nearest part of the existing salted network.
- allowing other busy routes with special difficulties, for example hilly areas, carrying between 1,000 - 1,500 vehicles per day, to be considered, if there are no nearby/parallel alternative salted routes; and
- using an increased weighting for buses, so that a 40-seater bus is now counted as 40 vehicles, regardless of the actual number of passengers.

In addition to this, on more lightly trafficked routes, Roads Service provides salt bins or grit piles for use by the public, on a self help basis.

As circumstances have not changed significantly since the assessment carried out in 2001 a further review of gritting procedures is not required at present. I can, however, advise that officials have agreed to examine the Roads Service operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

Traffic Management

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development how much Roads Service has spent on traffic management, carried out by its own staff, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5047/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out traffic management on its roads network, mainly through Local Transport Safety Measures (LTSM). The majority of the LTSM budget is spent on the local road network, including the following activities:

- Network Development Schemes;
- Safer Routes to Schools;
- Collision Remedial Schemes; and
- Footway Construction.

The table below sets out the total amounts spent in each of the last five years on LTSM schemes.

Financial Year	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Budget (£m)	33,678	32,379	22,443	26,809	22,459

Roads Service's financial records do not distinguish between the traffic management carried out by Road Service's in-house contractor and that carried out by private contractors. I am advised however, that the majority of the budget is expended on external contractors.

Traffic Management

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service allows traffic management to be carried out on their network by unapproved companies without traffic safety control officers. (AQW 5048/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it can only use contractors with the appropriate Street Works qualifications, when contracting out work.

All work is required to be supervised by competent contractors, who must satisfy stringent Health and Safety requirements, before they will be permitted to tender for contracts.

Traffic Management

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development how much Roads Service has spent on traffic management, carried out by private contractors, in each of the past five years. (AQW 5049/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my answer to his recent Assembly Question AQW 5047/09.

Airport Bus

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider extending (i) the bus lane time for the airport bus from Templepatrick to Belfast past the 9:30 limit; and (ii) the length of the bus lane. (AQW 5050/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Departments Roads Service has advised that the ongoing downstream M2 motorway widening scheme is expected to be completed in April 2009, and this should help reduce queue lengths and delays on the approach to Sandyknowes. In these circumstances, there are no plans, at present, to extend the operational hours or length of this bus lane.

The situation will be reviewed, when traffic conditions have settled down, following the completion of the widening scheme.

Translink

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many paying customers used (i) trains; and (ii) buses each month, in the past three years. (AQW 5056/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have indicated that they could not extract monthly information from their database in the time available. Translink have, however, provided the following annual figures for paying customers using bus and rail in the last three complete years:

	2005/06 (‘000)	2006/07 (‘000)	2007/08 (‘000)
Metro	17,919	18,481	20,159
Ulsterbus	17,522	17,768	18,386
NIR	6,435	7,366	8,213

In the table ‘paying customers’ are defined as customers who pay full fare, discounted fare or part of a fare which attracts concessionary fare.

Translink have not included Metro and Ulsterbus pupil pass numbers (non-electronic passes bought by parents from Translink for pupils), commuter card numbers (non-electronic annual adult passes) or paper based ticket numbers in the above. These categories should strictly be included under the definition of ‘paying customer’ but the numbers will be relatively small.

Public Transport

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many free public transport pass holders used (i) trains; and (ii) buses each month, in the past three years. (AQW 5057/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised that it does not hold the information in the format requested. Additionally, Translink has pointed out that it records the number of passenger journeys where a Smartpass has been used, not the number of journeys made by each pass holder. Set out below are the annual figures for the number of passenger journeys where a Smartpass has been used on bus and rail in the last three financial years:

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Metro	3,929,434	3,970,331	4,140,302
Ulsterbus	3,449,042	3,456,282	3,719,589
Northern Ireland Railways	492,739	611,776	732,655

Parking Meters: Lisburn City Centre

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what was the total revenue from parking meters in Lisburn City Centre, in the last 12 months. (AQW 5084/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department’s Roads Service has advised that in addition to Pay and Display machines in car parks, on-street machines in Lisburn City Centre also became operational on 28 July 2008.

A breakdown of the revenue collected from these parking meters in Lisburn City Centre is as follows:

- From the 28 July 2008 to the 31 January 2009 – receipts from the on-street machines totalled £160,000.
- In the 12 month period to the end of January 2009- receipts from the Pay and Display machines in Roads Service car parks totalled £710,500.

Translink: Possible Job Losses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if the current review of services provided by Translink includes the possibility of job losses within the organisation. (AQW 5086/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink is still developing its Corporate Plan for the next financial year and following two years in which it will set out how it can best provide public transport services within the budget available to it. In preparing the Plan, Translink will have to consider a range of options for using its resources in the most effective way. That process has not yet been completed, so at this stage it is not possible to make any definitive statement as to the contents of the Plan. I would, however, expect that Translink will make every effort to avoid redundancies.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4930/09, when were each of these contracts (i) negotiated; and (ii) finalised. (AQW 5087/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have explained that the word ‘negotiation’ does not exactly describe the contract process; rather the price reflects the market price at the time the contract is completed/finalised.

The contracts were completed/finalised as follows:

	ULSD	Gas Oil
24 Months April 2004 to March 2006	04/03/04	04/03/04
6 Months April 2006 to September 2006	17/04/06	17/04/06
6 Months October 2006 to March 2007	21/08/06	21/08/06
6 Months April 2007 to September 2007	05/09/06	22/09/06
6 Months October 2007 to March 2008	17/11/06	22/11/06
6 Months April 2008 to September 2008	28/03/08	28/03/08
3 Months October 2008 to December 2008	22/04/08	22/04/08
6 Months January 2009 to June 2009	23/05/08	23/05/08
3 Months July 2009 to September 2009	05/06/08	05/06/08
3 Months October 2009 to December 2009	25/07/08	25/07/08
6 Months January 2010 to June 2010	12/09/08	12/09/08

Note: The figures above include one period, in April 2006, when fuel was purchased direct from the supplier at the market price before a forward contract was put in place in May 2006.

Translink: CCTV Cameras on Buses

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development for the cost of installing CCTV cameras on Translink buses. (AQW 5151/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The budget estimate to supply and fit a multi-camera digital CCTV system per bus is typically £3,000. However, the cost can vary depending on the type of vehicle and specification of the CCTV system.

Translink: Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development how many Translink buses in the Ballymena area (i) are equipped with CCTV cameras; (ii) are not equipped with CCTV cameras; and (iii) are due to have CCTV cameras installed, in the next three years. (AQW 5155/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that, of the buses operating out of the Ballymena depot, 26 are equipped with CCTV and 34 are not. There are no plans to retro-fit these 34 buses with CCTV. However, all new buses will be fitted with CCTV.

Bus Shelters

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his Department's policy for the provision of bus shelters; and what percentage of bus stops have shelters. (AQW 5180/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service entered into a 15-year contract with bus shelter provider Adshel, in 2001, to provide approximately 1500 bus shelters across the North. The provision and maintenance of these shelters is funded by Adshel through advertising revenue and at no cost to the Department.

All Councils, with the exception of Fermanagh District Council, have signed up to this contract, which restricts them from providing advertising shelters from any other source. All Councils, as well as Translink, are also permitted to provide additional non-advertising bus shelters at their own expense.

When a request for a bus shelter is received, my Department consults with Translink to ensure there is either sufficient usage, or the potential for future public transport growth, at the particular stop. This ensures best use is made of the limited resources available.

The Roads Service contract has to date provided some 1200 bus shelters.

With regard to what percentage of bus stops have shelters, as explained above, there are three providers of bus shelters. In addition, Translink do not maintain central records on the numbers/locations of bus stops. It is therefore not possible to provide the percentage information requested by the Member.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development how many school bus routes in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area are not gritted during severe winter weather. (AQW 5206/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Road Service does not hold records of the school bus routes which are included in the Winter Service schedule. I can also advise that as Translink don't operate a dedicated school bus fleet, it does not record information in respect of mileage of bus services operated to carry children to and from school.

However, I can advise that the salting of school bus routes was considered in the 2001 review of my Department's Winter Service policy and procedures. One of the key outcomes of that review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, should continue.

The review also estimated that to include all school bus routes within the Department's gritting schedule, would more than double the annual cost of our salting operation. In addition to a substantial capital investment in new vehicles, it would cost some £4.5-7.0 million extra every year.

Nevertheless, the review recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. A 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles for the purpose identifying qualifying routes. Also as a result of the review, road links to small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more are now salted.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even further funds into salting and increasing funding for other activities, such as road maintenance, or Roads Service's collision remedial works programme. You may be interested to note that the latter resulted in reducing the total number of target collisions in 2006/07 by 68%, while increased investment in road maintenance would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces throughout the whole of the year.

I have no plans to carry out a further review of my Department's Winter Service policy, as there has been no significant change in circumstances since the completion of the 2001 review. However, I can advise that officials are currently examining the operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

A26 Glarryford to A44 Drones Road Dualling

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the pre-consultation process for the A26 Glarryford to A44 Drones Road dualling. (AQW 5217/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has met with the majority of the land and property owners affected by this scheme since the announcement of the preferred route for the A26 Glarryford to Drones Roads scheme, in August 2008, and plan to meet the rest during this current stage of the assessment process.

Roads Service will continue to communicate and engage with the land and property owners directly affected by the scheme throughout the remainder of the project.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development how many school bus routes in the Southern Education and Library Board area are not gritted during severe winter weather. (AQW 5221/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Road Service does not hold records of the school bus routes which are included in the Winter Service schedule. I can also advise that as Translink don't operate a dedicated school bus fleet, it does not record information in respect of the mileage of bus services operated to carry children to and from school.

However, I can advise that the salting of school bus routes was considered in the 2001 review of my Department's Winter Service policy and procedures. One of the key outcomes of that review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, should continue.

The review also estimated that to include all school bus routes within the Department's gritting schedule, would more than double the annual cost of our salting operation. In addition to a substantial capital investment in new vehicles, it would cost some £4.5-7.0 million extra every year.

Nevertheless, the review recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. A 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles, for the purpose identifying qualifying routes. Also as a result of the review, road links to small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more are now salted.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even further funds into salting and increasing funding for other activities, such as road maintenance, or Roads Service's collision remedial works programme. You may be interested to note that the latter resulted in reducing the total number of target collisions in 2006/07 by 68%, while increased investment in road maintenance would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces throughout the whole of the year.

I have no plans to carry out a further review of my Department's Winter Service policy, as there has been no significant change in circumstances since the completion of the 2001 review. However, I can advise that officials are currently examining the operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

Rathgael Road, Bangor: Weight Restriction on

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider introducing a weight restriction on traffic using the Rathgael Road, Bangor. (AQW 5254/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Rathgael Road in Bangor carries approximately 16,000 vehicles per day and is a through route, linking the A2 Belfast Road to areas on the periphery of Bangor. Under the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, the Rathgael Road is designated as a local distributor.

In addition to this, Rathgael Road forms part of a local bus route and also serves development in the area, therefore, heavy goods vehicles need to use the road to access the petrol filling station and shops situated along it.

Heavy goods vehicles are sometimes prohibited from using a road by the use of weight limit restrictions. However, these are normally only introduced on roads for structural reasons, that is, where there are weak bridges or culverts, or where the road structure is physically unable to take the weight of heavy vehicles. Rathgael Road would not fall within this category and would not warrant the introduction of a weight limit. Therefore, I can advise that Roads Service has no plans to introduce a weight restriction on traffic using the Rathgael Road, Bangor.

Traffic on M2

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development why commuters were caught up in heavy traffic on the M2 on Sunday 15 February. (AQW 5266/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I regret that there was inconvenience caused to road users during the closure of the M2 on Sunday 15 February. This was a planned closure to allow the final surfacing to be laid on the city bound carriageway of the M2, and the closure was well advertised through the normal range of channels.

During the closure Roads Service used variable message signs to display information about the motorway closure on a number of overhead gantries between Templepatrick and Sandyknowes junction. Our contractor also displayed information on a portable variable message sign between Rathbeg (Junction 6) and Templepatrick (junction 5). This information was to enable road users the opportunity to leave the route at Templepatrick and use an alternative route.

However, once traffic passed these advisory signs, which specified that part of the road ahead was closed, they became 'locked' into the road, as no further exits were available.

At the Sandyknowes junction it was necessary to reduce the slip road to one lane as it left the M2, because of problems with merging traffic on the roundabout, causing traffic to lock up the circulatory part of the roundabout. This was to allow traffic to be safely channelled through the roundabout and onto the diversionary route. In addition to this traffic signal timings, at the M2 and A8(M) were adjusted, during the closure, to maximise the throughput of traffic at Sandyknowes junction.

A weekend day was selected to ensure that the large majority of commuters with regular weekday travelling patterns would not be affected. In the past the M2 had been reduced to one lane on Sundays, over this stretch, without significant delays. However, it appears that on this occasion, there may have been more traffic than normal on this weekend, which exacerbated the problems.

While it is undoubtedly the case that some commuters were affected I hope that you will agree that Roads Service did take reasonable steps to inform people about the planned closure of the M2 on Sunday.

Finally, I can also advise that there are currently no further daytime closures planned for this part of the network.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many school bus routes; (ii) and how many miles in the Western Education and Library Board area were gritted during the severe winter weather. (AQW 5322/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Road Service does not hold records of the school bus routes which are included in the Winter Service schedule. I can also advise that as Translink don't operate a dedicated school bus fleet, it does not record information in respect of the mileage of bus services operated to carry children to and from school.

However, I can advise that the salting of school bus routes was considered in the 2001 review of my Department's Winter Service policy and procedures. One of the key outcomes of that review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, should continue.

The review also estimated that to include all school bus routes within the Department's gritting schedule, would more than double the annual cost of our salting operation. In addition to a substantial capital investment in new vehicles, it would cost some £4.5-7.0 million extra every year.

Nevertheless, the review recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. A 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles for the purpose identifying qualifying routes. Also as a result of the review, road links to small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more are now salted.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even further funds into salting and increasing funding for other activities, such as road maintenance, or Roads Service's collision remedial works programme. You may be interested to note that the latter resulted in reducing the total number of target collisions in 2006/07 by 68%, while increased investment in road maintenance would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces throughout the whole of the year.

I have no plans to carry out a further review of my Department's Winter Service policy, as there has been no significant change in circumstances since the completion of the 2001 review. However, I can advise that officials are currently examining the operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many school bus routes; (ii) and how many miles in the Western Education and Library Board area were not gritted during the severe winter weather (AQW 5323/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my reply to his recent Assembly Question AQW 5322/09.

Boa Island Road (A47) at Commons, Belleek

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a date for the resurfacing of the stretch of road at the Boa Island Road (A47) at Commons, Belleek. (AQW 5337/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service anticipate that the resurfacing scheme planned for the A47, Boa Island Road at Commons, Belleek, will be delivered within the next two years. However, at present, it is not possible to provide a more definite date for the commencement of this scheme.

Enniskillen to Sligo Road

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development if the upgrading of Enniskillen to Sligo Road was raised at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 23 January 2009. (AQW 5338/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The upgrading of the Enniskillen to Sligo Road was not raised at the North South Ministerial Council meeting held in plenary format on 23 January 2009.

However, this issue was discussed at my Bilateral Transport meeting with Noel Dempsey, TD, on 7 November 2008 and I will raise it again at the next North South Ministerial Council Transport Sector meeting in April 2009.

Larne Line: New Trains

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the outcome of the tendering process for new train sets, and to provide an estimate when passengers using the Larne line can expect to benefit from improved levels of service through new rolling stock. (AQW 5369/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I intend to make an announcement about the award of contract prior to the end of this financial year and I can confirm good progress has been made. The first of the batch of 20 new trains is scheduled to be introduced to passenger service by 2011 with the final set in 2013. This will allow the old trains currently in service on the Larne line to be replaced.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number and percentage of employees in his Department who have disabilities. (AQW 5374/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by the Department of Finance and Personnel on behalf of all NICS Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Hillhead Road, Newry

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development in relation to Hillhead Road, Newry, (i) for how long it has been closed; (ii) what feedback he has received from the resident's survey; and (iii) when will he make a decision about its future. (AQW 5380/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service closed the Hillhead Road, Newry to the general public on 26 January 2007, with an additional section of the road closed on 21 August 2008 following the detection of further movement on the road.

Roads Service conducted a survey of all local residents to ascertain opinion on the possible options being considered for Hillhead Road. On 25 June 2008, twenty-five letters were issued to residents along the road, with fourteen valid replies returned. Eight of the replies favoured the road being stopped up, or remaining closed, to effectively create a cul-de-sac. The remaining six replies were in favour of the road being realigned and full through vehicular traffic being re-established.

Roads Service is currently examining the best economic option for the Hillhead Road. This will involve further discussions with Consultant Engineers, who are examining realignment and cul-de-sac options for the road. There is also likely to be the need for further dialogue with the owners of the Drumalane Quarry. I am not in a position to outline when any decision will be taken about the future of the Hillhead Road, but can confirm that full consultation will take place with all interested parties before any decisions are reached.

Water Charges

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development if water charges are not introduced in 2010, what is the estimated cost to the Executive in (i) 2010; (ii) 2011; and (iii) 2012. (AQW 5381/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: At its meeting on 20 November 2008 the Executive decided that there will be no household water and sewerage payments in 2009/10. As part of the Budget Stocktake exercise commissioned by the Finance Minister covering 2009/10 and 2010/11 my Department estimated increased Northern Ireland Water (NIW) subsidy requirements of £180 million in 2009/10 if additional household payments were deferred.

Additional subsidy for NIW may be required in 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13 but the magnitude of this will depend on the Executive's policy for the future. I propose to put forward advice to the Executive in consultation with the Finance Minister shortly.

A32 Between Omagh and Enniskillen

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the upgrading of the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen. (AQW 5386/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Although I have not met recently with Minister McGimpsey to discuss the upgrading of the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen, I have been corresponding with him regarding these important roads improvements.

In my most recent correspondence, I undertook to keep Minister McGimpsey informed of any significant changes to the timescale for implementing the road improvements on the A32.

A32 Between Omagh and Enniskillen

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment his Department has made of the overall works and financial commitment needed for upgrading the A32 from Omagh to the new Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. (AQW 5387/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) 2018, announced in April 2008, included a package of road realignment and widening improvements on the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen, at an estimated cost of £10 million. This was supplemented by additional funding of £5 million from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to carry out road improvements to facilitate blue light services on this stretch of road.

This funding will enable a number of road improvements to be completed on the A32 during the ten year period covered by the IDP.

Consultants are currently preparing road improvement schemes at Esker Bog, between Dromore and Irvinestown, and at Sidare, between Irvinestown and Enniskillen. It is anticipated that these schemes will be delivered prior to the opening of the new acute hospital.

Consultants are also preparing schemes at Shannaragh, between Omagh and Dromore, Cornamuck and Newpark, between Dromore and Irvinestown, and at Kilgortnaleague, between Irvinestown and Enniskillen. It is anticipated that these schemes will not be delivered until after the opening of the new acute hospital, due to the statutory procedures that have to be followed.

Translink: School Buses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development how much grant aid has been paid to Translink for improving road safety signage on school buses, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5391/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department has not paid any grant aid to Translink in the last three years for improving road safety signage on school buses. In 2007/08, £3.4m had been allocated to enable Translink to introduce signage and lighting on school buses on the understanding that the necessary legislation would be in place. However, the regulations, which fall within the remit of the Department of the Environment, have not yet been introduced and the £3.4m was surrendered. My Department will rebid for the funding as required.

In the interim, Translink have fitted large yellow warning signs at the rear of the buses and installed bumper cameras to improve safety on buses used for school transport. The bumper camera allows the driver to view the front of the vehicle on his monitor for up to 30 seconds after the door is closed. Additionally, all recently purchased Translink buses have been fitted with red reflective strips at the rear. However, these costs are not separately identifiable.

Translink: Rasharkin

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if Translink would place information about bus times on public display in Rasharkin. (AQW 5410/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that two timetable displays were put up in Rasharkin on 13 February 2009.

Translink

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the fuel purchasing policy currently operated by Translink. (AQW 5436/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink operates a fuel purchasing policy where future fuel needs are contracted in advance at a fixed price. This has operated for a number of years and is typical of all transport companies.

Current policy is to enter into contracts by calendar quarter and to have between 5 and 8 quarters ahead covered at any time. This means that at the end of a quarter as a contract expires, fuel will be purchased for the period 12 - 15 months in advance ('quarter 5') and up to 15 – 24 months in advance ('quarters 6 to 8').

This arrangement was put in place in April 2008, prior to this, fuel was purchased forward as far as up to 24 months although there was no set period defined in policy.

Translink also ensures that forward contracts normally cover between 85% and 90% of requirements.

Translink also hedges to 'guarantee' the cost of fuel over the period of the contract. This reduces financial risk / facilitates stable financial planning.

Roads Service: Western Division

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to breakdown the levels of funding allocated to each section office in his Department's Western Division. (AQW 5486/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Road Service budget is allocated to its Divisions and the Section Offices on a basis of need.

In relation to roads maintenance, the resources available are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions using a range of weighted indicators, which are tailored to each maintenance activity, including resurfacing, patching, gully emptying and grass cutting. Divisions use these indicators when apportioning resources across Sections, to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of the North. The level of funding allocated to each section office in Western Division for maintenance operations, as at 23 February 2009, is as follows:-

Magherafelt	£2,522,000
Omagh	£4,317,000
Strabane	£3,913,000
Cookstown	£1,983,000
Fermanagh	£4,900,000
Dungannon	£4,652,000

In relation to the Roads Service budget for major works, improvements are prioritised across the whole of the North, after considering a wide range of criteria, which includes strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential savings in travel times, impact on the environment and value for money. While the actual spend on a major work scheme may be within one Roads Service Division, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the area covered by a Division, Section, constituency or county, in which it is located.

With regard to Roads Service expenditure on minor road improvements, which includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, transportation measures and minor bridge strengthening, the resources available for such works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions, on the basis of need. This approach uses indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. It also prioritises work to our bridge structures, using criteria such as loading restrictions due to bridge failures and/or defects and parapet repairs as a result of changes to current legislation. The Divisional budget is then split across the Sections in the Division using the same criteria. This approach ensures, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the North.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to list all the consultancy companies that have received payment from Northern Ireland Water since its inception; and (ii) to detail how much each company has been paid. (AQW 5512/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the associated fees and other costs of external consultancy firms employed from 1 April 2007 to 31 January 2009 are as detailed below. The costs are exclusive of VAT and do not include consultancy relating to the design and build of capital projects.

Adjust Procurement Solutions	£14,735
Alvarez & Marsal Europe	£10,934
Anna Shiels	£7,058
Austin Hunter	£800
AV Browne Advertising Ltd	£3,780
BCM Services	£760
BDO Stoy Hayward	£17,275
Black & Veatch Ltd	£46,383
BT Plc	£695
BTW Shiells	£26,772
Building Design Partnership	£5,957
Business Publications Company	£134,415
Capita Business Services Ltd	£6,808
Central Procurement Directorate	£268
Changing Chains	£75,508
CLN Solutions	£147,903
Consult NBI Ltd	£34,850
Contracting Out LLP	£380,063
Dundas & Wilson CSLLP	£163,331
E McMullan Ltd	£1,400
EIM	£49,618
Eleven Thirty Design	£990
Empathy Ratings Syndicated Research	£4,200
Ernst & Young	£10,044
Frontier Economics	£175,431
Fujitsu	£32,614
Glen Water	£33,320
Grafton Consultancy	£20,170
Halcrow Management Science Ltd	£83,295
HCL Communications	£1,390
Independent Occupational Health Ltd	£21,013
Insideredge	£42,500
Interim Management Assignments (NI) Ltd	£199,641
Jacobs Uk Ltd	£38,276
John Smyth	£66,123
Kirkwood Management Consultants	£56,800
Love PR	£4,320
Martin Cowley Media	£8,000
McAdams Design	£359,452
Mercer Human Resource Consulting Ltd	£63,340

MOTT MacDonald Group	£1,409,816
MWH Ltd	£341,555
NI Computing Ltd.	£13,714
NI Statistics	£17,846
Nick Owen Associates Ltd	£1,922
Ntuition Ltd	£112,456
Nueda	£7,480
Odour Assessment	£6,700
Ollave	£4,219
Peter Graham Consultancy Ltd	£5,400
Practical Planning Limited	£79,560
Pricewaterhouse Coopers LLP	£8,311,866
Prime Transformation Ltd	£4,500
Robinson Consulting	£31,926
Rospa (Health & Safety Audit)	£31,310
Sackers & Partners	£8,831
Stakeholder Communications Ltd	£16,118
Strategic Planning	£3,600
The Event -Ful consultancy	£22,450
Water UK Information & Learning	£798
Water people	£2,700
Weber Shandwick	£50,270
Total	£12,835,269

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many awards for lifetime Disability Living Allowance have been refused in the Strangford constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4734/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 removed the term “for life” in respect of awards of Disability Living Allowance and amended it to state awards “for an indefinite period.” Information is not available in the format requested as awards for an “indefinite period” occur when applications for Disability Living Allowance have been successful.

Construction Companies

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to list all work on behalf on her Department that construction companies are to carry out over the next 6 months and to indicate what jobs have been or are being delayed. (AQW 4986/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The list of all work that construction companies are to carry out over the next six months is below. No jobs have been, or are being, delayed.

BELFAST

- Obel - residential development
- Lanyon Towers - mixed use development
- The Soloist - office development
- The Boat - mixed use development
- St. Anne's Square - mixed use development
- Belfast City Centre Public Realm Regeneration Project
- 'The Mac' - arts centre in Cathedral Quarter
- Pottingers Quay - mixed use development
- Jobs and Benefits Office - Andersonstown

CRUMLIN ROAD GAOL/GIRDWOOD PARK SITE

- Ground resurfacing on various parts of the Gaol site
- Erection of temporary office accommodation at the Gaol
- Installation of telecommunications and electrical infrastructure to serve temporary office accommodation
- Repairs to fencing at Girdwood Park
- Demolition of former prison laundry
- Erection of new accommodation for security staff
- Post-demolition restoration work to the Gaol

DERRY

- Derry City Centre Public Realm Scheme
- Environmental Improvement Scheme at Jacqueline Way in Derry

BALLYMENA

- Jobs and Benefits office

In relation to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, work relating to the Housing Executive's programmes cannot be listed as it is too early in the review of their programmes to state the specific locations that might be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget

North Down: Social Housing Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to list the social housing projects underway in the North Down constituency; and the total value of each investment. (AQW 5062/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are four social housing projects currently onsite in the Programme year 2008/09:

- 6 units at Church Lane, Donaghadee
- 34 units at Shaftesbury Road, Bangor
- 5 units at 115-117 Hamilton Road, Bangor
- 11 units at 38-40 Bryansburn Road, Bangor

For reasons of commercial sensitivity the Housing Executive does not release individual scheme values with regard to the Social Housing Development Programme.

North Down: Social Housing Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to list the social housing projects scheduled for the North Down constituency in the next two financial years; and the total value of each investment. (AQW 5063/09)

The Minister for Social Development: This information can not currently be provided as the new 5 year Social Housing Development Programme (2009/10 – 2013/14) is currently being formulated and, pending

appropriate approvals, will be published on the Housing Executive's website at www.nihe.gov.uk. For reasons of commercial sensitivity the Housing Executive will not release individual scheme values with regard to the Social Housing Development Programme.

Car Parking Spaces: Priors Lea, Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what the cost would be to create car parking spaces for the residents of Priors Lea, Holywood. (AQW 5103/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has not sought any costings regarding the provision of car parking spaces at Priors Lea Holywood as only 5 of the 17 properties are in Housing Executive ownership. The Housing Executive's policy is to only consider carrying out such works where at least 50% of the housing stock affected is in its ownership. It would be inappropriate for public housing funds to be used primarily for the benefit of private home owners.

Car Parking Spaces: Priors Lea, Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development would she agree to proposals from other funding bodies for car parking spaces for residents of Priors Lea, Holywood. (AQW 5104/09)

The Minister for Social Development: If another funding body or agency wishes to bring forward proposals regarding this issue then the Housing Executive would be willing to discuss them.

Housing Executive: Newtownabbey and Antrim

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many properties are controlled by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the (i) Newtownabbey I; (ii) Newtownabbey II; and (iii) Antrim District office areas. (AQW 5113/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's stock at 31 January 2009, is as follows:

Newtownabbey District Office 1	2248
Newtownabbey District Office 2	2168
Antrim District Office	2468

Housing Executive: Newtownabbey and Antrim

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in (i) Newtownabbey II; and (ii) Antrim District office areas are being used or held for decant purposes. (AQW 5114/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties being used or held for decant purposes are:

Newtownabbey District Office 2	53
Antrim District Office	31

New Houses

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many new houses have been bought off the shelf from private developers; and how many new houses have been built with departmental funding. (AQW 5140/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In respect of the 2008/09 Social Housing Development Programme, as of 13 February 2009, 155 off the shelf units had been acquired. There have been 56 newbuild completions so far in 2008/09.

Grants Office: Castlereagh/Ards/North Down Borough Councils

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if an additional £100,000 will be allocated to the grants office that covers (i) Castlereagh Borough Council; (ii) Ards Borough Council; and (iii) North Down constituency. (AQW 5158/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has confirmed that an additional £100,000 has been allocated to the Dundonald Grants Office which covers the areas included within Castlereagh Borough Council, Ards Borough Council, and North Down Council.

Housing Benefit Applications: Ards District

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to address the delay in processing housing benefit applications in Ards District. (AQW 5159/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Within the administrative area covered by the Housing Executive's Newtownards District Office an average of 76% of new Housing Benefit claims were assessed within 14 days of all information being received (for the period April to December 2008). This has been against the background of a significant increase in Housing Benefit caseload. In view of this increase in demand, the Housing Executive is currently implementing a plan to increase Housing Benefit resources.

Houses with Special Adaptations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses with special adaptations have been allocated to applicants under 18 years of age. (AQW 5160/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In the financial year 1st April 2007 to 31st March 2008 the Housing Executive allocated six properties with special adaptations to applicants under 18 years of age. Information from Housing Associations for the same period indicates that one property with special adaptations was allocated to an applicant under 18 years of age.

Cavity Wall Insulation

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development if financial assistance will be made available for cavity wall insulation for the financial year 2009/10; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 5166/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme has been the subject of a Northern Ireland Audit Office report and a Public Accounts Committee hearing. Taking on board the recommendations made by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, I proposed a number of changes to the Warm Homes Scheme which were the subject of a public consultation exercise. A new Warm Homes Scheme will be introduced in Spring 2009. Cavity wall insulation will be offered to applicants eligible for assistance under the new Warm Homes Scheme as part of a package of insulation measures to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

Upper Springfield Area: Departmental Budget

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail by (i) reason; and (ii) purpose how much of her Department's budget was spent in the Upper Springfield area, since 3 February 2006. (AQW 5193/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since 3 February 2006, a total of some £15.72m has been spent by my Department in the Upper Springfield Area of West Belfast. The reasons for and purpose of this expenditure are detailed in the table below.

Amount	Reason	Purpose
£4.15m	Cost related to Falls Road Social Security /Jobs & Benefits Office	Office running costs
£5.01m £2.70m	Cost related to Andersonstown Social Security Office & New Jobs & Benefits Office construction	Office running costs; Jobs & Benefits Office construction costs to date
£0.20m	Social security benefit expenditure as administered by Falls Road & Andersonstown offices	Income Support & Jobseekers Allowance costs only
£3.08m	Various sponsored projects in the Upper Springfield Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Neighbourhood Renewal funding; Environmental Improvement scheme funding and Urban Development Grant
£0.58m	Various Housing expenditure	Northern Ireland Housing Executive programmes
£15.72m	Total Expenditure	

Upper Springfield Area: Rehousing Displaced Families

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how much of her Department's budget was spent on rehousing displaced families; and how many families were rehoused, in the Upper Springfield area, since 3 February 2006. (AQW 5194/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Approximately £9300 was spent on rehousing two displaced families in the Upper Springfield area since 3 February 2006.

Upper Springfield Area: Vacant Properties

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how much of her Department's budget was spent on securing vacant properties in the Upper Springfield area, since 3 February 2006. (AQW 5195/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Since 3 February 2006 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive spent £9930 securing vacant properties in the Upper Springfield area.

Upper Springfield Area: Refurbishing Damaged Properties

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how much of her Department's budget was spent on refurbishing damaged properties in the Upper Springfield area, since 3 February 2006. (AQW 5196/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive estimates that £122.4k was spent on refurbishing damaged properties in the Upper Springfield area since 3 February 2006.

Upper Springfield Area: Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings Scheme

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how much has the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings scheme paid out; or is offering on properties, in the Upper Springfield area, since 3 February 2006. (AQW 5197/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has, through the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings scheme paid out, or is offering on properties in the Upper Springfield Road area, since 3 February 2006, a total of £542,500.

Upper Springfield Area: Departmental Court Cases

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development what were the (i) costs; and (ii) reasons, for her Department's court cases, resulting from actions in the Upper Springfield area, from 3 February 2006. (AQW 5200/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The costs to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for instigating legal proceedings in the Upper Springfield Road area since 3 February 2006 was £6.4k approximately. These proceedings were to seek to recover possession of six properties, on the grounds of anti social behaviour.

Upper Springfield Area: Antisocial Behaviour Cases

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of anti-social behaviour cases reported to the NIHE, in the Upper Springfield area, since 3 February 2006. (AQW 5201/09)

The Minister for Social Development: 342 cases of anti-social behaviour were reported to the NIHE in the Upper Springfield area from 3 February 2006 until 20 February 2009. A breakdown is shown in the table below:-

Upper Springfield area Estates	Complaint type	No of Cases recorded
Whiterock Ballymurphy Moyard New Barnsley Turf Lodge/Gortnamonagh Gransha/Downfine Westrock Springhill Springfield Park Dermott Hill	Alcohol or Substance Abuse	6
	Boundary Dispute	3
	Criminal Behaviour	49
	Damage Property	83
	Drugs	2
	Gardens	2
	Harassment	33
	Multiple	33
	Noise	56
	Nuisance from Business Use	2
	Nuisance in public space	9
	Pets and Animals	12
	Rubbish Dumping	38
	Verbal Abuse	14
	Total	342

Warm Home Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the delivery of the Warm Home Schemes from 2000-2008; and has it delivered its objectives. (AQW 5238/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme has been extremely successful and hugely popular. The Scheme has provided energy efficiency measures to some 70,000 households and to date my Department has invested almost £118 million. In addition my Department is on track to meet its Public Service Agreement target this year. Although levels of fuel poverty have risen to 34% according to the 2006 House Condition Survey, this can be attributed to the sustained rise in global energy prices. However, had it not been for the Warm Homes Scheme, this figure would have been considerably higher. The Northern Ireland Audit Office, while recognising the valuable contribution the Warm Homes Scheme has made to thousands of households, recommended a number of changes to the Scheme to increase its effectiveness. These recommendations have been taken on board and a new scheme will be operational in the spring.

Departmental Agencies

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development which departmental agencies (i) have advice or helpline numbers that use non-geographical numbers; and (ii) what is the cost per minute for dialling these numbers. (AQW 5292/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency provides a range of telephony and text phone services that use non-geographical numbers, these are included in the following table;

Service line	Tel number	Text Phone
Pension Service Enquiry Line	0845 6018821	
Pension Service Enquiry Line		0845 601 8841
Pension Service Enquiry Line		0808 100 2198
Pension Service Teleclaims	0808 100 2658	
Pension Service Teleclaims		0808 100 2198
Pension Service Application Line	0808 100 6165	
Compensation Recovery Unit	0845 3590017	
Debt Management Unit	0845 3580027	
Benefit Leaflet Information Service	0845 6052020	
Benefit Enquiry Line	0800 220674	
Benefit Enquiry Line		0800 243787
Benefit Fraud Hotline	0800 975 6050	
Social Fund Crisis Loans	0800 0288822	
Disability and Carers Service Text phone		0800 242787
N.I. Contributions Deficiency	0845 603332	
N.I. Contributions Deficiency		0845 602 1277
Employment Support Allowance Fresh Claims	0800 085 6318	
Employment Support Allowance Change of Circumstances	0845 602 7301	
Employment Support Allowance Text phone		0800 328 3419

BT does not charge customers for 0800 or 0808 numbers. Calls to 0845 numbers are now free to BT customers depending on their calling plan. For those customers not receiving free calls they will be charged an 8p set up charge and 1.96p per minute during the day and 0.49p per minute for evening calls.

Customers ringing from a non BT landline or mobile may be charged by their network provider for the connection onto the BT number.

Housing Executive: East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people were on the Housing Executive waiting list in the East Belfast constituency, in (i) 2006-2007; (ii) 2007-2008; and (iii) current financial year. (AQW 5297/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by Parliamentary Constituency. However, the number of applicants on the social housing waiting list for the area covered by the Housing Executive's Belfast East District Office is as follows:

- 1130 applicants at 31st March 2007
- 1969 applicants at 31st March 2008
- 1895 applicants at 31st December 2008

Housing Executive: West Tyrone

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of anti-social behaviour cases (i) reported to; and (ii) dealt with by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the West Tyrone constituency, in each of the past three years. (AQW 5324/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of anti social behaviour cases reported to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's District Offices in the West Tyrone constituency, for each of the calendar years 2006 to 2008, is as follows:

	2006	2007	2008
Strabane	102	49	67
Omagh	48	102	78
Total	150	151	145

In relation to (ii) all cases were investigated by the Housing Executive.

Social Housing: Newtownabbey and Antrim

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the former Ministry of Defence properties bought by her Department and used for social housing in (i) Newtownabbey II; and (ii) Antrim District Housing Executive areas. (AQW 5331/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has not purchased any former Ministry of Defence properties within the areas in question. My officials are continuing to work with the Ministry of Defence to identify sites which may meet social housing need.

Social Security Agency: Strategic Business Review

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development when she will decide on the Strategic Business Review of the Social Security Agency. (AQW 5354/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As I have stated previously, the Strategic Business Review proposals are currently subject to ongoing public consultation which, on current plans, will run until late April 2009, and final decisions will not be made until the responses have been fully considered.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Shop

Ms S Ramsey asked the Assembly Commission what the criteria is to (i) sell; or (ii) display items in the Assembly shop. (AQW 5367/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): I refer the Member to the response in relation to AQW 4442/09:

At present, there are two distinguishing types of products supplied to the Assembly Gift Shop, details of which are set out below:

- (i) Items that are purchased by our contractor, Eurest, for sale in the Gift Shop. These are purchased with the agreement of Facilities Branch, and are usually bespoke items that contain the Assembly blue flax crest, and are therefore extremely popular amongst the many visitors who attend Parliament Buildings each year. The Eurest policy on the procurement of gifts is that those for retail sale are procured from local companies where possible thereby maximizing employment for local people. Most gifts are manufactured or processed within N.I.

- (ii) Items that are brought in by local crafters. In May 2008, Facilities Branch introduced an initiative whereby we contacted local enterprise agencies to ascertain whether local crafters would be interested in displaying their merchandise in the Assembly Gift Shop on a month by month basis. This has proved extremely popular, and is currently due to run until April 2009, when Facilities Branch will assess the success of the initiative. All crafters who have displayed their items are local businesses from Northern Ireland, and come from various constituencies.

Rental Valuation Process

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to assess the rental valuation process for all MLA constituency offices to which relatives of elected members are connected. (AQW 5532/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr A Maginness): The Assembly Commission is considering the rental valuation of MLA constituency offices as part of its deliberations on the recommendations contained in the recently published SSRB report.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 6 March 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Civil Service

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of civil service staff employed by its Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4850/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The table below sets out the number and grades of staff employed within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Grades	Position@1 May 2007	Position@ 5 February 2009
Senior Civil Service	26	26
Grade 6	4	3
Grade 7	43	47
Deputy Principal	61	76
Staff Officer	83	73
Executive Officer 1	37	27
Executive Officer 2	55	56
Administrative Officer	67	65
Administrative Assistant	28	23
Total	404	396

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has no agencies.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline its role in progressing Project Kelvin; whether OFMDFM has been working with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment on the project, and to outline any discussions it has held on the project in the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQW 4921/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister had no role in the decision making process or the EU State Aid application in relation to Project Kelvin, which is a joint Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)/Department of Communication, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) project, part-funded through INTERREG IV.

There has been no Executive consideration of Project Kelvin. The project has been taken forward jointly by DETI and DCENR.

DETI provided periodical updates on this project to OFMDFM as part of our Department's work on the North West Gateway Initiative. These updates included a brief summary of the economic development rationale for the project and the fact that it would benefit the North West Gateway Initiative area, which includes the District Council areas of Derry, Strabane, Limavady and Donegal. The DETI updates to OFMDFM did not include specific information on the decisions to place the landing station in Portrush and the telehouse in Coleraine.

At the meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in Plenary format on 23 January 2009, a number of Ministers referred to Project Kelvin. There have been no other discussions on this matter at meetings of the North South Ministerial Council.

Questions relating to the decision making process on this Project, the EU State Aid application and the joint understanding of the Project with the Irish government should be directed to DETI.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Executive and the Irish Government had a shared understanding of the rationale and legal basis for public funding of Project Kelvin; and to outline its understanding of (i) the main economic development rationale for public sector investment in the project; and (ii) the decision to place the landing station in Portrush and the telehouse in Coleraine.

(AQW 4924/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister had no role in the decision making process or the EU State Aid application in relation to Project Kelvin, which is a joint Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)/Department of Communication, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) project, part-funded through INTERREG IV.

There has been no Executive consideration of Project Kelvin. The project has been taken forward jointly by DETI and DCENR.

DETI provided periodical updates on this project to OFMDFM as part of our Department's work on the North West Gateway Initiative. These updates included a brief summary of the economic development rationale for the project and the fact that it would benefit the North West Gateway Initiative area, which includes the District Council areas of Derry, Strabane, Limavady and Donegal. The DETI updates to OFMDFM did not include specific information on the decisions to place the landing station in Portrush and the telehouse in Coleraine.

At the meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in Plenary format on 23 January 2009, a number of Ministers referred to Project Kelvin. There have been no other discussions on this matter at meetings of the North South Ministerial Council.

Questions relating to the decision making process on this Project, the EU State Aid application and the joint understanding of the Project with the Irish government should be directed to DETI.

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the application for approval for EU state aid for Project Kelvin, if Coleraine was mentioned either in the application or in the European Commission decision on state aid approval.

(AQW 4925/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister had no role in the decision making process or the EU State Aid application in relation to Project Kelvin, which is a joint Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)/Department of Communication, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) project, part-funded through INTERREG IV.

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Questions relating to the decision making process on this Project, the EU State Aid application and the joint understanding of the Project with the Irish government should be directed to DETI.

Project Kelvin: North-West Region

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the European Commission decision on state aid, in relation to Project Kelvin, specifically named the Derry/Londonderry city, Donegal, Limavady and Strabane as the North West Region in defining the area to benefit from Project Kelvin. (AQW 4926/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister had no role in the decision making process or the EU State Aid application in relation to Project Kelvin, which is a joint Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)/Department of Communication, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) project, part-funded through INTERREG IV.

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Questions relating to the decision making process on this Project, the EU State Aid application and the joint understanding of the Project with the Irish government should be directed to DETI.

Project Kelvin: North-West Gateway Initiative

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the North West Gateway Initiative was the region specified to benefit from Project Kelvin; and to confirm whether Coleraine forms part of the North West Gateway Initiative. (AQW 4928/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister had no role in the decision making process or the EU State Aid application in relation to Project Kelvin, which is a joint Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)/Department of Communication, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) project, part-funded through INTERREG IV.

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Questions relating to the decision making process on this Project, the EU State Aid application and the joint understanding of the Project with the Irish government should be directed to DETI.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if its Department and all its agencies and bodies, are complying with the 10 day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4969/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM and its sponsored bodies are taking all possible steps to pay suppliers in respect of valid invoices as promptly as possible and in line with the 10-day target.

Lifetime Opportunities

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the version of Lifetime Opportunities ratified by the Executive will be published. (AQW 5124/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 20 November 2008 the Executive agreed to formally adopt the broad architecture and principles of 'Lifetime Opportunities' as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and Social Inclusion.

'Lifetime Opportunities', Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland, was published following its launch by the then Secretary of State, Peter Hain, in November 2006. The strategy is available on the Departmental website and hard copies can be obtained from the central Anti-Poverty Unit in OFMDFM. However, we will continue to review and refine this report in light of current economic development.

Child Poverty

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work has been undertaken to address poor educational achievement and low aspirations in relation to child poverty; and when proposals for action on this issue will be brought forward. (AQW 5126/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is our view that the best way out of poverty is a job with a reasonable wage. Better educational achievement, aided by higher educational aspirations is an essential part of this.

Through its Public Service Agreements, the Executive has agreed challenging targets for raising standards and for reducing the gap in achievement that persists between those least and most advantaged.

As part of the Executive's strategy to tackle child poverty we will continue to focus on how best to improve the educational attainment of our children. Although this is an area of policy which largely rests with the Department of Education, it is also under active consideration by this department and at the Ministerial Sub-Committee on children and young people. We are also working closely with Atlantic Philanthropies and Barnados on a key project examining this issue.

We are soon to convene the first meeting of the new Ministerial Sub-Committee on Anti-Poverty. The Committee will be working in line with the life-cycle approach of tackling poverty and the issue of how to achieve higher educational achievement and aspirations will be a key issue for discussion.

Migrant Workers

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps the Executive is taking to ensure equality provisions are upheld for migrant workers during the economic downturn. (AQW 5172/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Section 75(1) of the NI Act 1998 requires all designated public authorities, when carrying out their functions, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the nine categories including racial group. Section 75(2) also requires designated public authorities to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. These duties apply at all times including during periods of economic downturn.

Although the Executive has no formal statutory enforcement role in relation to Section 75 of Northern Ireland Act 1998 it is committed to observing the duties arising under Section 75 and playing an active role in ensuring compliance with the legislation. OFMDFM also funds the Equality Commission which has the role of ensuring monitoring of compliance and also offering support and advice to individual groups.

Additionally, the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 outlaws discrimination on grounds of colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origin and makes racial discrimination unlawful in employment. An amendment to the Race Relations Order in 2003 also implements the European 'Race Directive' (Council Directive 2000/43/EC) here.

The Order makes it unlawful to discriminate, either directly or indirectly on racial grounds in the areas of employment and training; education; the provision of goods, facilities or services; the disposal and management of premises and advertisements. It also places a statutory duty on district councils to make appropriate arrangements with a view to ensuring that its various functions are carried out with due regard to the need:

- (a) to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination; and
- (b) to promote equality of opportunity, and good relations, between persons of different racial groups.

It is through this legislation and associated mechanisms that the Executive ensures that equality provisions are being upheld for migrant workers during an economic downturn.

Investment Strategy

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what impact the current economic downturn will have on the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland in the next three years.

(AQO 2160/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Despite the difficulties caused by the economic downturn, departments are expected to bring significant levels of capital works to the market as set out in their Investment Delivery Plans.

Work is being taken forward to consider the key factors that may affect deliverability. We are aware that the potential impacts of the economic downturn on the Investment Strategy include, for example, a decline in site acquisition costs and easement of inflationary pressures.

Play and Leisure Policy

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how many folders were produced; and (ii) the cost of each folder for the policy statement 'Play and Leisure Policy for Northern Ireland'.

(AQW 5334/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: 1000 binders and inserts were produced and each binder cost £3.66 in total. It was decided to use a loose-leaf binder format which would allow for the insertion of the Implementation Plans and further documents when produced at minimal cost. This will be more cost-effective than producing separate printed documents and will allow recipients to retain related information in one place over the lifetime of the Implementation Plans.

Investment Strategy: Strangford

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline all infrastructure projects planned for the Strangford constituency via the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, during this Assembly term; and the monetary value of each investment.

(AQW 5459/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Please find the information you requested in Annex A. Projects of £0.5m or more have been listed separately. In some cases it has been necessary to include the full value of projects covering an area greater than Strangford and where costs cannot be disaggregated by constituency.

Information has been provided up to the end of 2010-11 which is the term of the present Budget. The period beyond 2010-11 in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland is indicative and details of possible expenditure at constituency level are not available.

ANNEX A

ISNI PROJECTS OF £500,000 & OVER IN STRANGFORD CONSTITUENCY UP TO THE END OF 2011

Department	Project Title	Value	Comments
Department of Education	Glastry College Ballyhalbert	£12.5m (Estimated)	New school Building
Department of Education	St Joseph's Primary School Carryduff	£5.4m (Estimated)	New school Building
Department for Employment & Learning	South Eastern Regional College Newtownards	£4.85m	New Further Education College
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development	Special Environmental Projects (SEPs)	SEP funding available to NICMS participants is profiled as £2.37 million for 09/10 and £4.032 million for 10/11 (including EU funding).	SEPs are an integral part of the NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS).
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development	Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority – Portavogie Harbour Works	Total value of works estimated between £0.7m and £1.1m	Through funding from European Fisheries Fund to undertake a series of capital Improvements at Portavogie Harbour including sediment remediation, outer pier and quay wall repair, fish market refurbishment, and small vessel pontoon facility.

Department	Project Title	Value	Comments
Department for Regional Development	Ballywalter Wastewater Treatment Works	£1.9m	Northern Ireland Water does not hold details of capital infrastructure projects broken down by parliamentary constituency. Projects listed below are within the Ards Borough Council Area which covers most of the Strangford constituency.
Department for Regional Development	Portaferry Wastewater Treatment Works	£5.3m	
Department for Regional Development	Cloughy Wastewater Treatment Works	£1.5m	
Department for Regional Development	Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works	£3.6m	
Department for Regional Development	Portaferry Drainage Area Plan	£0.6m	
Department for Regional Development	Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works	£1.9m	
Department for Regional Development	Millisle Drainage Area Plan	£1.3m	
Department for Regional Development	Ballygowan Wastewater Treatment Works	£3.4m	
Department for Regional Development	Ards North Zone Watermain Improvements	£3.7m	
Department for Regional Development	Ballygowan Zone Watermain Improvements	£3.4m	
Department for Regional Development	Ards North Zone Watermain Improvements	£3.7m	
Department for Regional Development	Ballygowan Zone Watermain Improvements	£3.4m	
Department for Regional Development	Frederick Street Link Newtownards	£2.4m (Estimated)	Opened to traffic November 2008

Department	Project Title	Value	Comments
Department for Regional Development	Newtownards Southern Distributer Road	£14m (Estimated)	Under Construction
Department for Social Development	Ards Development Bureau and Community Network	£1.10m	Modernisation Fund Capital
Department for Social Development	Bowtown Phase 1 Environmental Improvement scheme	£0.85m	
Department for Social Development	Bowtown Phase 2 Environmental Improvement	£1.01m	
Department of Culture Arts & Leisure	Building Sport Programme - Down District Council	£1.275m	
Department of Culture Arts & Leisure	Newtownards Replacement Library –	Not available	No costs available at this stage

ISNI PROJECTS UNDER £500,000 IN STRANGFORD CONSTITUENCY UP TO THE END OF 2011

Department	Projects	Group Value	Comments
Department for Regional Development	Roads	£1.02m (Estimated)	Per Year
Department for Regional Development	Small wastewater infrastructure improvement projects	£1.3m	
Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety	South Eastern Trust Refurbishment Schemes	£0.39m	
Department for Social Development	Peninsula Healthy Living	£0.62m	Modernisation Fund Capital

Gender Advisory Panel

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what organisations and government Departments are represented on the Gender Advisory Panel. (AQW 5467/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Terms of reference for the Gender Advisory Panel ensure that membership is sufficiently broad to cover all the issues relevant to the Gender Equality Strategy. They include an additional undertaking that officials will also maintain contacts across the voluntary and community sector as required.

The Gender Advisory Panel is chaired by a senior OFMDFM official and representation is from a range of organisations as follows:

- Coalition on Sexual Orientation
- Disability Action
- Equality Commission Northern Ireland
- Family Planning Association NI
- Women's Forum NI
- NIC/ICTU
- Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
- NI Rural Women's Network
- Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities
- Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
- Older Women's Network
- The Men's Project
- Women's Resource and Development Agency

- Women's Support Network
- Youth Action
- Youth Action
- Men's Action Network
- CBI
- Women's National Commission
- Women's Aid Federation NI

The Gender Advisory Panel met in January 2009 and is due to meet again in April 2009. We and the junior Ministers also continue to maintain an awareness of issues and concerns through various meetings and events involving representative organisations.

Executive's Office in Brussels

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the cost of running the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels in each of the last three years. (AQW 5477/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Costs for each of the last three complete financial years are:

2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
£512,218	£546,827	£529,838

This does not include the costs of the DARD policy officer, which fall to DARD, or the costs incurred by InvestNI in relation to their staff co-located with the OFMDFM team in the Brussels office.

Child Poverty

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many children were considered to be living in child poverty, broken down by constituency, in each of the past five years. (AQW 5481/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are three measures used – 'relative income' poverty, 'absolute income' poverty and 'mixed relative income and material deprivation' poverty. Relative income poverty is the number of children living in households whose income is below 60% of the UK median income.

The tables below show the number of children living in households experiencing relative income poverty by Parliamentary Constituency in three year bands from 2002/03 – 2004/05; 2003/04 – 2005/06 and 2004/05 – 2006/07. Data has been combined in this way in order to improve the reliability of the figures.

Child Poverty by Parliamentary Constituency, 2004/05 - 2006/07					
Parliamentary Constituency	Children in Poverty	%	Confidence Intervals		
Belfast East	1,900	2%	+/-	114	6%
Belfast North	5,700	5%	+/-	384	7%
Belfast South	1,400	1%	+/-	63	4%
Belfast West	7,700	7%	+/-	439	6%
East Antrim	4,500	4%	+/-	272	6%
East Londonderry	4,100	4%	+/-	272	7%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	7,600	7%	+/-	446	6%
Foyle	10,100	10%	+/-	489	5%
Lagan Valley	3,500	3%	+/-	130	4%
Mid Ulster	9,300	9%	+/-	482	5%

Child Poverty by Parliamentary Constituency, 2004/05 - 2006/07					
Parliamentary Constituency	Children in Poverty	%	Confidence Intervals		
Newry And Armagh	7,100	7%	+/-	363	5%
North Antrim	6,000	6%	+/-	291	5%
North Down	5,100	5%	+/-	271	5%
South Antrim	5,300	5%	+/-	241	5%
South Down	8,800	8%	+/-	439	5%
Strangford	5,900	6%	+/-	325	6%
Upper Bann	6,400	6%	+/-	334	5%
West Tyrone	3,200	3%	+/-	170	5%
Total	103,700	100%	+/-	1,327	1%

Source: Households Below Average Income, NI 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07

Child Poverty by Parliamentary Constituency, 2003/04 - 2005/06					
Parliamentary Constituency	Children in Poverty	%	Confidence Intervals		
Belfast East	2,000	2%	+/-	123	6%
Belfast North	5,100	5%	+/-	329	6%
Belfast South	2,600	2%	+/-	156	6%
Belfast West	5,800	5%	+/-	314	5%
East Antrim	4,100	4%	+/-	231	6%
East Londonderry	5,400	5%	+/-	321	6%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	9,000	8%	+/-	493	5%
Foyle	12,400	11%	+/-	604	5%
Lagan Valley	2,400	2%	+/-	82	3%
Mid Ulster	7,700	7%	+/-	430	6%
Newry And Armagh	7,300	7%	+/-	371	5%
North Antrim	7,800	7%	+/-	381	5%
North Down	4,400	4%	+/-	232	5%
South Antrim	5,900	5%	+/-	262	4%
South Down	9,000	8%	+/-	417	5%
Strangford	6,200	6%	+/-	357	6%
Upper Bann	5,800	5%	+/-	277	5%
West Tyrone	5,200	5%	+/-	288	6%
Total	108,200	100%	+/-	1,369	1%

Source: Households Below Average Income, NI 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06

Child Poverty By Parliamentary Constituency, 2002/03 - 2004/05					
Parliamentary Constituency	Children in Poverty	%	Confidence Intervals		
Belfast East	3,100	3%	+/-	228	7%
Belfast North	6,200	6%	+/-	405	7%
Belfast South	2,100	2%	+/-	118	6%

Child Poverty By Parliamentary Constituency, 2002/03 - 2004/05					
Parliamentary Constituency	Children in Poverty	%	Confidence Intervals		
Belfast West	7,700	7%	+/-	428	6%
East Antrim	3,500	3%	+/-	185	5%
East Londonderry	7,800	7%	+/-	461	6%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	8,300	8%	+/-	420	5%
Foyle	10,400	10%	+/-	529	5%
Lagan Valley	2,900	3%	+/-	129	4%
Mid Ulster	7,200	7%	+/-	449	6%
Newry And Armagh	5,800	5%	+/-	304	5%
North Antrim	6,800	6%	+/-	296	4%
North Down	3,800	3%	+/-	187	5%
South Antrim	5,600	5%	+/-	246	4%
South Down	7,600	7%	+/-	340	4%
Strangford	5,700	5%	+/-	306	5%
Upper Bann	7,800	7%	+/-	357	5%
West Tyrone	6,600	6%	+/-	404	6%
Total	108,800	100%	+/-	1,379	1%

Source: Households Below Average Income, NI 2002/03, 2003/04, 2004/05

Economic Research Institute

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Executive discussed and reached a conclusion on the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland document ‘Mitigating the Recession: Options for the Northern Ireland Executive’ dated Feb 2009. (AQW 5511/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We understand that this is a draft ERINI research paper presented by its Director to the Regional Development Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee of the Assembly on 18 February. It has not been formally published or submitted to us for consideration and has consequently not been discussed by the Executive.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of its current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to its Department’s responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5535/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We have taken the lead in developing the Executive’s response to the economic downturn and credit crunch. At a departmental level the most marked impact of the current crisis has been in areas operating in non-sterling areas such as the Brussels Office and the Washington Bureau. However, through careful management of resources it has been possible to maintain the level of service delivery.

The department has modified the role and responsibilities of its Economic Policy Unit to enable it to act in support of Ministers in determining and monitoring a co-ordinated Executive response to the economic crisis. The “credit crunch” has become a standing item of Executive business and we are continuing with a series of meetings and initiatives to protect the interests of local people and businesses in these difficult economic times.

We have said on a number of occasions that the priorities set out in our Programme for Government remain valid. In particular our decision to make the economy our top priority was well made, and ever more firmly justified in the new economic circumstances.

Investment Strategy

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on the current status of the Investment Strategy figures. (AQW 5538/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In these challenging economic times we are fully focused on delivering the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. We have been in regular contact with Investment Strategy stakeholders, including the Construction Employers Federation and others, to explore options to alleviate the impact of the economic downturn and have made some £33 million available for construction-related expenditure as part of an Executive Credit Crunch Package. £9.4 million of ISNI funding has been brought forward into the current financial year.

Substantial progress is being made with expenditure this year and we are still on course to achieve a record in excess of £1.4bn.

Strategic Investment Board

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the yearly cost of the Strategic Investment Board. (AQW 5550/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The operational costs of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in 2007/8 were some £4.189 million. The SIB also provided assistance to departments in obtaining specialist advisory services in support of Investment Strategy projects at a total cost of £3.087 million.

It is anticipated that the cost of running the SIB in this financial year will be in the region of £3.3 million, whilst a further £3.9 million will be spent on advisory services to assist departments in further progressing Investment Strategy projects.

Email: Increasing the Usage of

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of email. (AQW 5613/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM's staff have access to modern electronic IT equipment and facilities and the Department seeks to make best use of technology to reduce the volume of hard copy paper documents.

Staff have been using e-mail systems since the creation of OFMDFM in 1999. Since then, an ever increasing use has been made of this medium to transmit business communications. This has corresponded with a dramatic decrease in the issue of internal and external correspondence in paper format during this period.

An electronic documents and records management system (TRIM) was introduced in 2008. This is a key element of the wider NICS Reform Programme. In addition to improving the way in which our staff work, the TRIM system is facilitating a very significant reduction in the use and retention of documents in paper format. TRIM now holds the official record of departmental business, meaning that registered paper files are no longer created.

OFMDFM's sustainable development policy includes a commitment to use less paper more sustainably and to support electronic document management. The printing of documents is discouraged, unless required for business purposes.

The Department of Finance and Personnel is currently developing a sustainable Information Communication Technology policy for the NICS. This is due to issue in the summer of 2009.

10-Day Payment Target

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much of the total amount due to suppliers has been paid within the ten day payment target. (AQW 5641/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM has paid £1.504 million to suppliers within the ten-day payment target. This information is detailed, by month, in the table below.

	Value of invoices paid (£'000s)	Value of invoices paid within 10 day target (£'000s)	%
Dec-08	£794	£468	59%
Jan-09	£893	£646	72%
Feb 2009 to date	£663	£390	59%
Total	£2,350	£1,504	64%

Reducing Stress in the Workplace

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that stress is the primary reason for absence at work, to outline what actions the Department intends to bring forward to increase motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5646/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Psychiatric and psychological illnesses, which include stress, anxiety and depression, are the main reasons for long-term sickness absence in the Department and across the wider Northern Ireland Civil Service.

We recognise that such illnesses, whether work-related or not, can lead to long-term absence from work. Measures are in place to help staff who experience such difficulties, including welfare support services and an employee assistance programme, which is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for staff and their immediate family members.

Early intervention in such cases is considered essential and immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service can be made when required.

Consideration is being given to undertaking an NICS-wide stress survey. It is hoped that the results of the survey will help inform and influence policy direction and target 'hotspots'.

Civil Service

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the recent appointment of the former head of the Civil Service to the board of the Ulster Bank was cleared through the appropriate procedures. (AQW 5780/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The recent appointment of the former Head of the Civil Service to the Board of the Ulster Bank was cleared through the appropriate procedures. Sir Nigel Hamilton complied with the requirement in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Code that any member of the Senior Civil Service who, within two years of retirement, proposes to take up paid employment, should obtain the prior agreement of his former employing Department before taking up such appointments. This is in keeping with the conditions which also apply to the GB Civil Service.

In line with the guidance of the GB Civil Service Advisory Committee on Business Appointments which provides advice on such appointments in Northern Ireland, Sir Nigel served a six-month period of grace (the normal period required to elapse) between leaving his post as Head of the Civil Service and taking up his post as Non Executive Director on the Board of Ulster Bank. In addition, in line with the Advisory Committee's advice, Sir Nigel has agreed that he will not lobby Ministers or officials on behalf of the bank or its clients until he had been retired one year.

Equality Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much of the £1m in awards from tribunals on discrimination cases taken by the Equality Commission came from public money. (AQW 5784/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland was consulted on this and it has confirmed that none of the £1m in awards from tribunals on discrimination cases taken by the Equality Commission came from public money. All compensation awarded to claimants by a tribunal decision in 2007/08 was in respect of cases involving private sector organisations only. All compensation paid to claimants in cases brought against public sector bodies was paid on foot of a settlement, not as consequence of an award from a tribunal.

Equality Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if clients pay any of the legal fees for cases referred to a tribunal by the Equality Commission. (AQW 5785/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: An individual who believes they have been the victim of unlawful discrimination and who decides to pursue their complaint by way of litigation may apply to the Equality Commission for legal assistance with their claim. Where an application to the Equality Commission for assistance to pursue a case of discrimination is granted legal assistance, this will include all legal costs incurred in the litigation from the grant of assistance. Assistance is granted in stages and is subject to review. Assistance in a case may be reviewed on a number of occasions in accordance with the Equality Commission's Legal Enforcement Policy and the complainant's condition of offer of assistance. An officer of the Commission will carry out all investigatory and legal work and the grant of assistance will cover any fees to a barrister.

Monitoring Rounds

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much money it has surrendered in the quarterly monitoring rounds. (AQO 2171/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has surrendered a total of £7.825 million of resource expenditure and £8.268 million of capital in the 2008/09 financial year.

These easements are broken down as follows:

- In the June 2008 Monitoring Round, OFMDFM surrendered £0.2 million resource expenditure.
- In the September 2008 Monitoring Round, OFMDFM surrendered £0.42 million of resource expenditure and £1.89 million of capital.
- In the December 2008 Monitoring Round, OFMDFM surrendered £5.929 million of resource expenditure and £5.978 million of capital.
- In the February 2009 Monitoring Round, OFMDFM surrendered £1.276 million of resource expenditure and £0.4 million of capital.

Child Poverty

Mrs O'Neill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made in developing targets and indicators on child poverty and when these will be published. (AQO 2172/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government very clearly outlines the Executive's targets for reducing Child Poverty including severe child poverty. In particular the Executive committed to work towards the elimination of child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020 and reduce child poverty by 50% by 2010. It further committed to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012.

The Executive reaffirmed its commitment to these targets when it adopted the broad architecture of Lifetime Opportunities as its Strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion.

All our targets are measured against a baseline and monitored on a periodic basis in accordance with the relevant treasury guidelines. We have therefore built up a robust set of information on all three poverty measurements – relative, absolute and the mixed measure. The Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion will play an important role in assessing this information.

It will be the responsibility of this Committee to agree new priorities and key Executive actions to meet these targets. It is important to note that some key actions will be driven by central Government on a UK-wide basis.

This work will supplement the work of the Ministerial Sub-Group on Children, where Child Poverty is a particular focus. The issue of the lack of affordable childcare which gives rise to a barrier to employment, will be the subject of specific recommendations which we expect to see and consult on in the coming weeks.

Public Money: Consultancy Spend

Mr McLaughlin asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the public money it has spent on consultants given its failure to appoint new non Executive Directors to the Strategic Investment Board. (AQO 2173/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently considering the outcome of a competition to appoint non-executive directors to the Strategic Investment Board (SIB). Positions on SIB require individuals with relevant high calibre experience and proven ability at top management level in the public or private sectors. We decided it appropriate in this case, not least against the background of the unprecedented level of capital investment in public infrastructure that the SIB has a key role in supporting, to seek outside professional assistance with the recruitment process and a firm of executive recruitment specialists was appointed with the aim of establishing a suitable field of candidates for our consideration.

The cost of engaging consultants was £48,600 excluding the cost of advertising.

Lloyds/HBOS

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations have been made to Lloyds-HBOS in relation to retaining jobs. (AQO 2174/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 25 September 2008, we wrote to the Chief Executive of Lloyds TSB, Eric Daniels to register our strong interest to ensure that the position of local jobs was protected in the planned acquisition of HBOS.

On 19 January 2009 we met with Rosa Wilkinson, the Director of Public Policy and Regulation at Lloyds TSB to discuss their proposals in more detail.

We were conscious that the terms of the acquisition originally outlined an intention to eliminate branch duplication and consolidate some head office functions. While Lloyds TSB does not have any branches in Northern Ireland, we were keen to impress on the Company the importance we attach both to the local HBOS branch network and to its customer service centre in Belfast which Invest NI originally sponsored and provides in excess of 1500 jobs.

HBOS was one of the first major financial institutions to invest in Northern Ireland and its presence here is highly valued. While the detailed outworking of the amalgamation of HBOS into Lloyds is still developing we, along with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will keep this matter under review.

The creation and retention of job opportunities is, of course, a key priority for the Executive, and we will do all that we can to protect local jobs and engage with key investors.

Ebrington Barracks

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much money earmarked for the development of the Ebrington barracks it has surrendered in the December Monitoring Round. (AQO 2175/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Prior to the commencement of the December monitoring round, £1,830,000 was earmarked for development on the Ebrington site.

£522,000 was surrendered in the December monitoring round process. This represents a re-phasing of two major capital works projects, and any time lost will be made up in the following year.

Ilex is committed to complete all planned projects early in the next financial year.

North/South Ministerial Council: Benefits

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the benefits provided by the workings of the North South Ministerial Council. (AQO 2176/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are committed to practical and mutually beneficial North South co-operation and the North South Ministerial Council is assisting us in taking this forward.

Financial Package

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if all Ministers brought forward plans to stimulate the economy prior to the financial package announced on behalf of the Executive in December 2008. (AQO 2177/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: All Ministers were involved in developing and agreeing the final content of the package measures announced on 15 December 2008. In a series of Executive meetings in the run up to the announcement all Ministers were asked to put forward suggestions for measures. These were collectively assessed and evaluated in terms of their affordability, viability and effectiveness in addressing the core themes of the package. These themes were addressing energy and fuel poverty; tackling debt and unemployment; dealing with cost of living pressures; support for housing and construction; and support for business. As part of the process of identifying remedial actions the investment proposals of all departments included in the Investment Strategy were reviewed.

Section 75: Departmental Failure to Comply

Mr McQuillan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what departmental decisions and policies have been quashed by the courts through failure to comply with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQO 2178/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are not aware of any departmental decisions or policies that have been quashed by the courts through failure to comply with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Section 75 enforcement duties are set out in Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Public authorities are required to submit equality schemes to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Schedule 9 sets out what an equality scheme should contain. The Commission may approve schemes or refer them to the Secretary of State; it must notify the Assembly in writing about any referrals and send the Assembly a copy of the scheme. Where a scheme is referred, the Secretary of State shall: approve it; request the public authority to make a revised scheme; or make a scheme for the public authority. The Secretary of State must notify the Assembly in writing where a new scheme is requested; and must notify the Assembly in writing and provide a copy where a new scheme is made.

Strategic Investment Board: Operational Changes

Mr McFarland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what changes have been made to the operations of the Strategic Investment Board in light of the economic crisis. (AQO 2179/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) continues to support departments in the delivery of the Investment Strategy. This has included providing assistance to departments for projects particularly affected by the current difficulties in financial markets.

In addition the SIB has provided advice to Ministers on how delivery of the Investment Strategy could best be used to help mitigate the impact of the current economic difficulties, particularly on the construction industry.

OFMDFM: Staff Absence Levels

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many of its staff are currently off work for more than 20 days. (AQO 2180/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Our most recent information indicates that four staff are currently off work on long-term absence of more than 20 days.

Investment Strategy

Mr Newton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Investment Strategy is helping the Executive to mitigate the impact of the economic downturn. (AQO 2181/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In these challenging economic times we are fully focused on delivering the Investment Strategy. We have been in regular contact with Investment Strategy stakeholders, including the Construction Employers Federation and others, to explore options to alleviate the impact of the economic downturn and have made some £33 million available for construction-related expenditure as part of an Executive Credit Crunch Package.

As part of the Investment Strategy some £1.3bn of public construction schemes are currently on site. They include major projects in the Health Service, including RVH Critical Care, Phase 3b at Altnagelvin Hospital and Phase 2A at the Ulster Hospital; three major projects on roads, including the Westlink/M1, A1 and A4 dualling schemes; 10 waste-water projects; the Belfast sewers project; four further education projects at eight locations; and 14 major schools projects. A major programme of social housing investment is also underway. Two arts projects, Ulster Museum and Crescent Arts Centre are in addition underway.

The Strategic Investment Board has put in place a tracking system that will help us to monitor projects across the Investment Strategy and where possible, within our resources, we will expedite projects to aid the construction industry in the challenges it currently faces.

Strategic Investment Board: Work Programme

Mr McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what changes have been made to the work programme of the Strategic Investment Board in light of the economic crisis. (AQO 2182/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) continues to support departments in the delivery of the Investment Strategy. This has included providing assistance to departments for projects particularly affected by the current difficulties in financial markets.

In addition the SIB has provided advice to Ministers on how delivery of the Investment Strategy could best be used to help mitigate the impact of the current economic difficulties, particularly on the construction industry.

Strategic Investment Board: Consultancy Spend

Mr P Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was paid to consultants for recruiting up to four new non-executive directors to the Strategic Investment Board. (AQO 2184/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Consultants were paid £48,600 in respect of work carried out on this recruitment competition.

Foreign Investment

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is being done to encourage foreign investment to remain in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2185/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The economy is our top priority and we are fully committed to encouraging major global corporations to invest, grow and reinvest. Building on the successful Investment

Conference in May 2008, we visited the United States last December and delivered a very powerful message to corporate America, showcasing the wealth of opportunity that exists here for US business.

We are continuing to work closely with InvestNI and our offices in Washington and Brussels in supporting existing and new foreign investment and ensuring that the damage caused by the current economic crisis is kept to a minimum.

We are planning an extensive programme of visits to US cities this month focusing on consolidating existing investors and in attracting new inward investment. Our itinerary will include face to face meetings with top executives from the IT, manufacturing and film production industries in Chicago, Silicon Valley and Los Angeles. We will be reminding American companies that we can provide an excellent opportunity for business, offering a highly competitive cost environment with operating costs at a significantly lower level than our competitors in the UK and Europe. Trade Minister Arlene Foster has just returned from a major Trade Mission to the Netherlands where she discussed how to improve business between us and the Netherlands.

We will be reinforcing the message, that despite the global economic downturn, we remain very much open for business.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Businesses: Upper Bann

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm and rural businesses her Department has supported in the Upper Bann constituency in the past three years; and to indicate the amount of the investment in each case. (AQW 5223/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The information is not held in the form requested and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Details of subsidy/grant payments by recipient by European financial year to October 2007 are published on the Department's website. The Department recognises the interest shown by Members in having better information on the level of payments by area. It will arrange to collate the information on CAP, Rural Development and other grant payments for the EAGF year October 07/08, by postcode prefix level and will make that available in the Assembly Library by no later than the end of March

Animal Welfare Legislation

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she is going to bring animal welfare legislation up to UK standards; and when she intends to publish her legislative proposals. (AQW 5224/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Review of Animal Welfare legislation in the North is drawing to a close.

I will shortly be examining all the evidence presented to me. I will then consider the scope and the timetable for new legislation, in line with the resources that are available.

Ecological Management and Conservation Biology

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if he will investigate her Department's refusal to fund the students studying Ecological Management and Conservation Biology for one year courses, in the current academic year. (AQW 5243/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In the current academic year my Department has not received applications for funding from students studying Ecological Management and Conservation Biology. Neither have any refusals been issued.

In the academic year 2007/08 there was provision for 2 MSc and 8 PhD Studentships to be awarded under our Postgraduate Competition. Applicants had to meet eligibility criteria and undergo a selection process, which

included a panel interview. During the 07/08 academic year and preceding years students wishing to study for an MSc in Ecological Management and Conservation Biology were eligible to apply for a studentship. Awards were not exclusive to this subject and the competition included other agricultural and food related MSc programmes.

Prior to the current financial year my department was faced with a particularly difficult challenge of prioritising a wide range of work programmes aimed at meeting the needs of stakeholders, within a limited budget. As part of a range of financial measures, I announced on 21 March 2008 that no new postgraduate MSc Studentship Awards would be offered for the academic year 2008/09.

In the current academic year my Department is funding 24 PhD research studentships under our Postgraduate scheme. These projects contribute to our Strategic Vision and Goals. No funding is available for MSc studentships under this scheme.

Farm Businesses

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the criteria set by her Department for issuing business numbers; and to clarify where these criteria are published. (AQW 5274/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As a Paying Agency the Department is required to ensure that each recipient of European subsidy or grant has a unique identification number, that all payments to the same business can be associated and that artificial conditions, such as multiple identities, are not created for the fraudulent obtaining of grant or subsidy.

The Department may issue a farm business identification number if two criteria are satisfied, (a) there is a farming activity by the business and (b) it is separate from any other farm business.

To assess if the business is separate the Department seeks information on legal status, economic activity, structure/organisation, membership, relationships with other farm businesses, and commercial and operational arrangements. Applicants are asked to provide such information in the format set out on form FBI and reference to this is made in the annual SAF packs.

Europe has introduced similar requirements to apply to those applicants for rural development funding who are not already farm businesses. Consequentially a separate class of identification numbers for such funding applicants has been introduced to facilitate the delivery of the new rural development programme. A business identify number will be awarded if the rural business (or project) is separate from any farm business or any other rural business. Information is sought in the form included in the rural development application packs.

The Department is finalising an explanatory leaflet about business identification numbers which it proposes to issue in the near future

Farm Businesses

Mr Elliott asked he Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the total number of farm businesses. (AQW 5278/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are 46,569 businesses in the north of Ireland recorded on the Grants & Subsidies computer database. Of these, some 41,600 have activated entitlements under Single Farm Payment (SFP). The remainder includes producers who are no longer active, rural development applicants, legacy subsidy scheme producers and other producers not in receipt of SFP.

Farm Businesses

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm businesses have a unique business number but share a herd number with other farms. (AQW 5279/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A check by the Department indicates there are no farm businesses which share a herd number with others. Checks and controls are in place to ensure that a herd number can only be allocated to one farm business.

Farm Businesses

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what are the criteria for issuing herd numbers; and where are they published. (AQW 5280/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A new applicant wishing to receive a herd number must meet the following criteria:

- Be aged 18 or over;
- Not be an existing registered keeper of animals of that species;
- Assume responsibility for compliance with legislation in respect of identification, registration and movement requirements;
- Provide proof of access to land, such as a Solicitor's letter or agreements from auctioneer/letting agent.
- Have a planned location for keeping them including proper stock handling facilities and a building suitable for isolating animals.

If there is any likelihood that the new herd is going to be associated with an existing herd, the application will be rejected.

When the application meets all the above criteria an Animal Health and Welfare Inspector conducts an initial visit and interviews the applicant. If the criteria are not met or there are other problems with the application, the application will be returned.

Following a satisfactory inspection by Veterinary Service, the applicant's case is referred to Grants and Subsidies Branch for consideration of a Farm Business Number.

Only after a farm business number is granted, will a herd or flock number be issued

Details of the above process is not currently published, but DARD officials are currently drafting an explanatory booklet covering herd numbers and business identity numbers for issue to all current livestock farmers and potential applicants for grants or subsidies .

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many projects have been submitted to her Department by Queen's University, Belfast; and the University of Ulster about Bovine Tuberculosis in each of the last ten years; and to detail how many were refused funding and the reasons for refusal. (AQW 5316/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: No projects have been submitted by either University over the past 10 years.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many projects have been submitted to her Department by the Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute about Bovine Tuberculosis; to detail how many were refused funding and the reasons for refusal, in each year since the organisation was created. (AQW 5317/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Between the establishment of the Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in April 2006 and present, AFBI has submitted three projects on bovine TB to DARD in 2006.

No projects have been refused.

Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she can confirm that there will be help for the fishing industry if the EU changes the mesh size. (AQW 5344/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The European Fisheries Fund Regulation (COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 1198/2006) allows the Department to pay grant contribution for the first replacement of gear if new technical standards are introduced. Grant would normally only be payable if a person made the investment to switch to the new gear before the requirements become mandatory.

The particular circumstances are set out in Article 25 (8) of the EFF Regulation.

Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many people in the fisheries industry have experienced skin problems from wearing rubber gloves since their use was introduced for health and safety reasons. (AQW 5345/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department does not hold information on the health of workers in the fishing industry.

Clay Loughs, Killyleagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps he is taking to control water levels at Clay Loughs in Killyleagh. (AQW 5347/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Responsibility for the maintenance of water levels at Clea (Clay) Lakes rests with the current landowners, Dunbia.

Rivers Agency, in conjunction with its legal advisers, is taking forward the transfer of rights from Dunbia to the Agency.

Converting Land to Forest

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her Department's progress in converting 1,650 hectares of land to forest. (AQW 5351/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department plans to increase woodland cover by 1,650 hectares over the next three years, as identified in the NI Executive Programme for Government 2008-2011. This year we are likely to fall short of our milestone of 550 hectares for 2008/2009 because of the difficult economic conditions and the strong commitment of landowners to keep farming. However, we have introduced, or are about to introduce, the following initiatives to increase uptake over the following two years and beyond:

- Seeking to amend the current Farm Woodland Premium Scheme so that more farmers can access its annual payments.
- Placing greater emphasis on the promotion and marketing of all forestry grant schemes.
- Reviewing the barriers to increasing woodland cover and how these can be overcome.
- Publicising changes in the Single Farm Payment system that will benefit those considering new afforestation.

Forest Service will continue to provide grant aid and advice to landowners through its forestry grant schemes, supported by funds made available under the Rural Development Programme.

Animal Health Strategy

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the progress of the Animal Health Strategy. (AQW 5352/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Through the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), Ministers in Belfast and Dublin agreed to the development of an All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy to reflect a commitment to maintaining a high animal health status where that existed and to working more closely together to eradicate disease when it occurred. An All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy is being developed, the ultimate aim of which is the free movement of animals on the Island through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.

Following presentations to the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee by DARD officials on 12 February and 26 February 2008, the draft All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy was issued for consultation with key stakeholders on 4 March 2008.

Following consultation, officials reported back to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on the responses received to the consultation at a meeting on 3 July 2008. The Committee raised a number of questions about general animal health issues, which officials responded to during the meeting and later in writing on 31 July 2008.

Following postponement of the NSMC Agriculture Sectoral meetings scheduled for 19 September 2008 and 5 February 2009, it is anticipated that Ministers will be asked to agree the draft Strategy at a forthcoming NSMC Agriculture Sectoral Meeting.

In the meantime, North-South co-operation continues through the work of nine animal health and welfare working groups set up under the NSMC arrangements. This work is underpinning the development of the All-Island Strategy.

Tuberculosis and Brucellosis

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an assessment of her Department's success in reducing the incidences of tuberculosis and brucellosis. (AQW 5353/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

TUBERCULOSIS

Since 2002, there has been clear evidence of a significant decline in the incidence of TB throughout the north of Ireland. The annual herd incidence peaked in 2002 at 9.93% and was 5.58% as at the end of December 2008. There is a key goal in the Programme for Government to reduce by 27% the incidence of TB by 2011. My assessment is that over the last 6 years we have made considerable progress and I hope that further progress will be made. Whilst over recent months there has been a levelling off in the downward trend in TB, it is too early to say that this will be a sustained change in the direction of the trend.

BRUCELOSIS

After many years of almost complete freedom, brucellosis was detected in the north of Ireland in the late 1990s. The disease increased in incidence and reached a peak in 2002. The Dept. responded strategically with a range of measures and initiatives and the disease declined year on year, until the end of 2005. At the end of 2005 a single exceptional breakdown caused a significant number of secondary breakdown herds in 2006. This halted the encouraging downward trend.

However, in 2007 and 2008 the number of confirmed breakdowns has again dropped in response to vigorous control measures. Disease statistics to the end of December 2008 indicate that the incidence is dropping. In fact, there has not been a confirmed brucellosis breakdown in the north of Ireland during November 2008 to January 2009.

I am content with the overall progress my Department is making in the campaign to eradicate brucellosis from our cattle.

Disposal of Chicken Litter

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) when a study to investigate the various methods for the disposal of chicken litter was commissioned by her Department; and (ii) the cost of this study. (AQW 5365/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has investigated methods for the disposal of chicken litter on several occasions.

The Expert Group on Alternative Uses of Manures, (EGAUM), was convened by DARD in 2005. It reviewed technologies for processing livestock manures, including poultry litter. The group published its final report in March 2006.

In 2008, a joint working group of government officials, including representatives of my Department and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), and poultry farming representatives was established. The Group considered measures for the storage and management of poultry litter and compliance with the Nitrates Directive.

In November 2008, AFBI and DARD officials gave a presentation to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on technologies for the disposal of poultry litter. No external costs were incurred in conducting these studies.

Scientists at AFBI and DARD officials continue to monitor the development of relevant technologies on an ongoing basis.

Poultry Waste Disposal Technology

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, in light of emerging poultry waste disposal technology, the Department will be commissioning a new study to ensure that all technologies are investigated fully and that the most environmentally, economically and technologically sound method of disposal is established and encouraged. (AQW 5366/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department, in conjunction with the Agri Food and Bio-Sciences Institute, monitors the development of emerging technology for the disposal of poultry litter on an ongoing basis.

Officials are aware of developing technologies, such as “quickwash” which are currently in the early stages of development.

My Department has no plans at present to commission further specific studies into emerging technology for the disposal of poultry litter.

However my officials will keep the option to commission further studies under review and will continue to monitor the development of technologies as a viable alternative to the land spreading of poultry litter.

Alternative technologies brought forward by industry are welcomed and will be considered by my Department.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number and percentage of employees in her Department who have disabilities. (AQW 5373/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by the Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all NICS Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of her current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to her Department’s responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5405/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

(i) What the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of her current policies and practices.

My Department through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, continues to deliver its normal core programmes to the agri-food industry, including further and higher education programmes, industry training, technology transfer and benchmarking. While uptake continues to be strong, CAFRE is experiencing some difficulty due to the economic downturn in securing appropriate work placements for students on some of its food education programmes. However, it continues to liaise with the industry to ensure these placements are made. My Development Advisers report some increase in the number of financial related queries being received from farmers and growers. A significant issue affecting this sector is that the majority of them are now part-time and rely on other sources of income. Due to the downturn in the other sectors (particularly the construction sector) other sources of income for these farm families are being considerably reduced.

(ii) What changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to her Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn.

In recognition of the economic downturn and with the agreement of my Executive colleagues, I am providing additional support to the fishing industry and those farmers who suffered losses as a result of the August 2008 flooding.

Assistance to Fishing Industry

My officials are currently finalising the business case for the provision of a £700k package of additional support to assist our fishing fleet through these difficult economic times. The package focuses on the payment of Light Dues, Harbour Dues and Landing Fees incurred by the local registered fishing fleet. Subject to business case approval and the introduction of implementing legislation, it is hoped to make payments to the industry before the end of March 2009.

Flooding Hardship payments

In order to address the hardship of farmers who suffered losses as a consequence of the August 2008 flooding, I secured funding from the Executive. The Executive agreed to the provision of £500,000 for 'flooding hardship in agriculture' and as a result the Flooding Hardship Scheme, was launched on 18th February, with a view to making payments to eligible farmers by the end of March 2009.

I will continue to keep under review the impact of the economic downturn and will consider the need to change existing policies or programmes including, if appropriate, modification of the Rural Development Programme.

Oldstone Road, Antrim

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures have been taken to ensure that no further flooding occurs at the Oldstone Road in Antrim; and what long-term solutions she is proposing to counter this situation. (AQW 5407/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: General maintenance, including repairs to a culvert, has already been undertaken in the vicinity of the Sixmilewater River and Oldstone Road. In addition, my staff are continuing to provide flood emergency response and were able to reassure resident's concerns over the weekend of 31st January to 1st February 2009.

An evaluation of the performance of the existing flood defences is underway, including a review of the operation of drainage systems behind the river defences. This investigation will report and any minor works identified that would reduce flood risk will be given high priority. Looking to the longer term, a study has been instigated to assess what can be done to reduce flood risk to what is a complex problem.

My colleague, the Minister for Regional Development, has advised me that his Department's Roads Service considers the road drainage along this length of road as adequate. The gullies are routinely inspected and cleaned and, upon receipt of any severe weather warnings, staff carry out additional checks to ensure they are free from debris, as part of Roads Service's local emergency response plan.

Rural Businesses: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm and rural businesses her Department has supported; and what was the amount of investment in each case, in the North Down constituency, in the past three years. (AQW 5415/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The information is not held in the form requested and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Details of subsidy/grant payments by recipient by European financial year to October 2007 are published on the Department's website. The Department recognises the interest shown by Members in having better information on the level of payments by area. It will arrange to collate the information on CAP, Rural Development and other grant payments for the EAGF year October 07/08, by postcode prefix level and will make that available in the Assembly Library by no later than the end of March.

Derry/Londonderry: Civil Service Staff

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Civil Service employees there are in her Department in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5520/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture & Rural Development currently employs 225 staff in Derry/Londonderry offices.

Derry/Londonderry: Departmental Staff Travelling to Belfast for Work

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many employees in her Department travel from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast for work. (AQW 5521/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture & Rural Development currently employs 4 staff who have a home address in Derry/Londonderry and who work in DARD offices located in Belfast.

Royal National Institute for the Blind

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many meetings she has had with the Royal National Institute for the Blind; and what the outcomes of the meetings were. (AQW 5565/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date I have not received any invitations to meet with the Royal National Institute for the Blind nor have I held any meetings with the Institute

Rivers Agency: Greencastle Flooding

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress Rivers Agency has made to alleviate flooding in Greencastle, County Down, in the interim and the long term. (AQW 5635/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency is in the process of carrying out site inspections of the site at Greencastle, Co Down, with a view to identifying potential maintenance works.

A feasibility study will be commissioned in April 2009 to investigate the potential for further flood alleviation works in the area.

Due to the sensitive environmental and fishery interests on the Whitewater River, full consultation will be necessary with all relevant stakeholders prior to the commencement of any maintenance works.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many application forms for the Farm Modernisation Scheme were just posted to each office. (AQW 5652/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The total number of postal applications received between the 17th February and the 20th February was 2297.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many application forms for the Farm Modernisation Scheme were just hand delivered to each office. (AQW 5653/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Between the 17th February and 20th February, the total number of applications hand delivered to each office and received over the counter, was 6563.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many application forms for the Farm Modernisation Scheme were posted and also hand delivered to each office. (AQW 5656/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can not provide that answer for some weeks as the processing of all applications will not be completed until then. I shall write to you when that information comes available.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a list of all the offices that were open to receive application forms for the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5657/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD offices that accepted Farm Modernisation Programme Application Forms are:

- Kilpatrick House
38-54 High Street
BALLYMENA
BT43 6DT
- Glenree House
Carnbane Industrial Estate
NEWRY
BT35 6EF
Rathkeltair House
Market Street
DOWNPATRICK
BT30 6LZ
- Armagh Office
2 Newry Road
ARMAGH
BT60 1EN
- Coleraine Office
Crown Buildings
Artillery Rd
COLERAINE
BT52 2AJ
- Inishkeen House
Killyhevlin Industrial Estate
ENNISKILLEN
BT74 4EJ
- Dungannon Office
Crown Buildings
Thomas Street
DUNGANNON
BT70 1HR
- Sperrin House
Sedan Avenue
OMAGH
BT79 7AQ

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a list of all the office and part-time offices which were open but not permitted to receive application forms for the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5658/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following are the DARD public offices open on Tuesday 17 February 2009 but not receipting application forms for the Farm Modernisation Programme:

- Larne DVO
Crown Buildings
59 Pound Street
Larne
- Ballymoney Office
Crown Buildings
John Street
Ballymoney
- Lisburn Office
4 Batchelors Walk
Lisburn
- Armagh DVO
Mall West
Armagh (office doesn't open until 10.30am on Tuesday mornings)
- Newtownards DVO
Kiltonga Industrial Estate
Newtownards
- Magherafelt Office
31 Station Road
Magherafelt
- Maghera Office
12a Coleraine Road
Maghera
- Derry DVO
Crown Buildings
Asylum Road
Derry
- Ballygawley Office
2 Church Street
Ballygawley (office doesn't open until 9.30am on Tuesday mornings)
- Strabane Office
Orchard Road Industrial Estate
Strabane

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the number of applications that Countryside Services received for the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5677/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Countryside Services received no applications for the Farm Modernisation Programme

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the number of staff available to Countryside Services to process applications for the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQW 5678/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Countryside Services have not appointed any staff to process applications for the Farm Modernisation Programme.

Bee Population

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide any comparison of the bee colony losses in Germany and Slovenia in Spring 2008 to those recorded in Northern Ireland last year. (AQW 5700/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There has been no comparison between bee colony losses in Germany and Slovenia in Spring 2008 and here. The bee losses in those countries were as a result of the application of particular crop pesticides known as neonicotinoids. The treatment indirectly affected a large number of their bee colonies. No such incidents of bee losses have ever been recorded in Britain or in Ireland.

Bee Population

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what research has been carried out to identify if there is a direct link between the use of neonicotinoids and the decline of the bee population. (AQW 5701/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There has been no research into losses caused by neonicotinoids at this time, as no bee losses here have ever been attributed to their use. Average bee losses in the north of Ireland in 2008 were within the natural over-winter drop, and there is no evidence of any overall decline in the bee population here.

Bee Population

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what guidelines exist on use of pesticides in the treatment of crops and their relevant toxicity in relation to the bee population. (AQW 5703/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Pesticide Safety Directorate's Code of Practice for Using Plant Protection Products contains specific guidance on the protection of bees.

Individual plant protection products with the potential to harm bees will be labelled appropriately.

More general guidance on pesticide use can be found in the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Prevention of Pollution of Water, Air and Soil issued by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Bee Population

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how insecticide toxicity levels are measured in an agricultural environment for its potential effects on the honey bee population. (AQW 5704/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under EU law, detailed risk assessments are carried out on all pesticide active ingredients before a product can be marketed.

Part of this process assesses the risk to beneficial insects such as honeybees prior to approval, and specific conditions may be placed on products which limit how they can be used.

Bee Keepers

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of commercial apiaries and the number of amateur bee keepers located in Northern Ireland. (AQW 5725/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Whilst there are no commercial apiaries located in the north of Ireland, there are some 1,000 amateur beekeepers managing in the region of 4,000 hives here.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

2012 Olympic Preparations

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures he has taken and plans to take to maximise the economic and social impact of all 2012 Olympic preparations. (AQW 5556/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): A Strategy for maximising the benefits to Northern Ireland from the London 2012 Olympics has been developed, with DCAL having overarching responsibility for co-ordination. A NI 2012 Leadership Group, chaired by the DCAL Minister, has been established with senior representation from key lead organisations aligned with the 7 themes of the Strategy as follows: Sport NI, Arts Council NI, NI Tourist Board, InvestNI, Disability Sport NI, Volunteer Development Agency and Local Government. Progress is being made against three legacy outcome areas (sport, economic and social) as follows:

SPORT

The sports element of NI's 2012 Strategy is fully aligned with the objectives of the draft Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation "Sport Matters", which will be considered by the NI Executive at a future meeting. This theme is led by SportNI. An Elite Facilities Programme is underway and includes a 50m pool. Work is progressing to secure pre-games training camps in NI and 26 facilities offering 22 sports disciplines are included in the London 2012 Pre-Games Training Camps Guide. Venues range from Boxing, Judo, Hockey, Football, Swimming, Gymnastics, Archery and Fencing. 8 NI venues have also been included in the Pre-Games Training Camp Guide for the Paralympics.

ECONOMIC

An electronic brokerage system 'CompeteFor' has been created to support UK businesses in bidding for 2012 related contracts and was launched in Belfast by LOCOG and InvestNI on 8 April 2008. To date in excess of 640 companies from NI have registered and 9 companies from NI have won contracts for 2012 related work, worth approximately £60m. 96 companies have received Games related training in professional tendering in the construction industry and quality management systems through workshops held in locations across NI. 27 NI companies have visited the Olympic Park and met with ODA officials in November 2008. A consultant has been appointed to work with a pilot group of 5 companies to produce a framework document for winning tenders.

SOCIAL

The Cultural Olympiad was launched over the weekend of 26-28 September 2008 with over 20 different events taking place across NI. Northern Ireland has been awarded one of the first Inspire Marks in the UK for "The Pied Piper", a collaboration between the Ulster Orchestra's Education and Outreach Department, Associate Composer Brian Irvine, 200 schoolchildren from 4 schools in different areas of Belfast, and 60 dancers from dance schools around NI. The Inspire mark is London 2012's non-commercial brand for cultural projects and events and is awarded to outstanding, surprising, exciting, and brand new cultural projects inspired by London 2012. Northern Ireland is also committed to two of the major London 2012 signature projects, and a NI Creative Programmer has been recruited by Arts Council to support this work (funded by DCAL). Northern Ireland anticipates funding of £1.31m through the Legacy Trust UK to support a programme that aims to deliver legacy through the fusion of arts and sports. The Arts Council NI is the managing agent for delivery of Legacy Trust UK funds in NI, and last year ACNI held an open competition which identified six arts organisations that will become Project Lead Partners. DCAL is also funding the implementation of the 2012 Volunteering Strategy through a partnership with the Volunteer Development Agency and has supported the launch of the London2012 Education programme 'GetSet' in NI in September 2008.

FUTURE PLANS

Key priorities for 2009/10 include the need to encourage involvement and participation; develop NI's Cultural Olympiad plans – including involvement in the Olympic Torch Runs and Ceremonies; to secure pre-games training camps; and to further promote business opportunities – for example, a business conference is to be facilitated by the ODA in June 2009. Central co-ordination by DCAL remains essential so as to enhance communications and thereby maximise the potential legacy benefits for everyone in NI.

Elite Facilities Programme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consider separating sports grounds safety funding from the Elite Facilities Programme. (AQW 5584/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sports grounds safety funding and funding for the Elite Facilities Programme are already separate.

Departmental Correspondence

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will make available all correspondence between his Department and (i) Bovale Developments; or (ii) the Millwood Company. (AQW 5602/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My department has had no correspondence with either of these two companies.

Installation of 3G Pitches

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants are available through his Department for partnership approaches for the installation of 3G pitches. (AQW 5614/09)

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 operates two capital grant programmes, Places for Sport: Surfaces and Building Sport, which would offer funding for the construction or upgrading of pitches including 3G pitches. Both of these programmes are currently closed, however, SNI hopes to re-open for applications later this year, subject to available budgets.

Reducing Stress in the Workplace

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that stress is the primary reason for absence at work, to outline what actions his Department intends to bring forward to increase motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5644/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Psychiatric and psychological illnesses, which include stress, anxiety and depression, are the main reasons for long-term sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

My Department recognises such illnesses whether work related or not, can lead to long term absence from work. Therefore measures have been put in place to help staff experiencing such difficulties, including welfare support and an employee assistance programme, which is available 24/7 for staff and immediate family members. Early intervention is considered essential and immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service is made when required.

Consideration is being given to undertaking an NICS wide stress survey which will help inform and influence policy direction and target 'hotspots'. However, as part of my Department's commitment to the management of absence due to stress, the Department has already started to implement the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards.

Ards and Down Sea Trout Enhancement Association Project

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on investigative work for the Ards and Down Sea Trout Enhancement Association project. (AQW 5655/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL officials have met ADSEA and Ards Borough representatives to discuss the proposed ADSEA project and outlined the specific information required to progress any policy changes to facilitate the project. Ards Borough Council now needs to prepare the cost benefit analysis and develop their outline of how the scheme might operate and complete a business case to HMT Green Book standard.

My officials will be happy to engage with the Council during this process and provide advice as required. To date there has been no further contact from the Council.

Lisburn: Elite Facilities Programme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he can confirm capital funding from the Elite Facilities Programme for gymnastics in Lisburn. (AQW 5747/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is no existing application for funding from the Elite Facilities Programme for gymnastics in Lisburn.

EDUCATION

School Buses: CCTV Cameras

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for the cost of installing CCTV cameras on school buses. (AQW 5153/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Feistítear CCTV i ngach feithicil nua de chuid Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELB) mar ghnáthchleachtas.

All new Education and Library Board (ELB) vehicles have CCTV fitted as standard. The cost to retrospectively fit the remainder of the ELB school bus fleet would depend on the age and size of the individual vehicles but would cost on average in the region of £3,000 per vehicle with the total estimated to be in the region of £1.5 million.

The Department for Regional Development has advised me that the budget estimate to supply and fit a multi-camera digital CCTV system per Translink school bus is also typically £3,000. However, the cost can vary depending on the type of vehicle and specification of the CCTV system.

First Language of Pupils

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if the schools census provides information on the first language of children; and, if so, to supply the figures of the first language of pupils for the academic year 2008/9. (AQW 5333/09)

The Minister of Education: Bailítear eolas ar theanga baile na bpáistí mar chuid de dhaonáireamh na scoileanna. Tá figiúirí do theangacha baile na bpáistí i scoileanna sa tábla thíos.

Information on the home language of children is collected as part of the school census exercise. Figures for home language of children in schools are contained in the table below.

NURSERY, PRIMARY, POST PRIMARY AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS PUPILS BY HOME LANGUAGE – 2008/09

Home language	Total
Albanian	20
Arabic	142
Bengali	118
Cantonese	659
Chinese (not specified)	129
Czech	37
Dutch	47
Egyptian	173
English	313,399
Farsi (Persian)	14

Home language	Total
Filipino/Tagalog	535
French	47
German	79
Greek	21
Gujarati	16
Hindi	172
Hungarian	96
Indian (not specified)	81
Irish	1,111
Italian	43
Japanese	9
Korean	9
Latvian	149
Lithuanian	858
Malaysian	56
Mandarin	134
Malayalam	220
Other/less than 5 cases	870
Punjabi	89
Pashto	12
Polish	2,662
Portuguese	596
Romany	11
Romanian	82
Russian	95
Slovakian	185
Somali	8
Spanish	67
Swedish	5
Tamil	21
Thai	34
Turkish	16
Urdu	126
Vietnamese	6
Zulu	5

Home language	Total
Total	323,264

Source: Annual school census.

Note:

1. Not all children who do not have English as their home language will have difficulty with the English language. The number of children who have English as an additional language and have difficulty with the English language and require support is recorded separately.
2. Work is currently being undertaken to investigate the language of those pupils specified as 'other'.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of her current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to her Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn.

(AQW 5465/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé ró-luath go fóill measúnú cruinn a dhéanamh ar an mheath eacnamaíoch agus an tionchar a bheadh aige ar bheartais agus ar chleachtais a sholáthar, cé gur dócha go mbeadh éifeacht dhíreach ag costais mhéadaithe agus ag dífhostaíocht ardaithe ar theaghlaigh a bhfuil ioncam íseal acu.

It is still too early to assess with any degree of accuracy the full impact of the economic downturn on the delivery of policies and practices, although, increasing costs and rising unemployment are likely to impact directly on families with low incomes. I have in place policies which are specifically targeted at addressing social need for example free school meals and clothing allowances. It will be important to ensure sufficient resources are made available to support those children directly affected.

The impact of the economic downturn on the Education capital programme has been evidenced through a lower than anticipated volume of disposal of surplus assets with consequence of lower receipts.

The Executive is collectively managing the response to the economic downturn with the aim of protecting local people and business from the worst effects of the economic downturn. In this context additional resources have been made available in this financial year to tackle backlog maintenance within the education sector. Those additional resources (£4 million) have provided further opportunities for the local construction industry.

The package of measures agreed by the Executive and announced on the 15 December 2008 are part of a continuing monitoring and response initiative.

It is imperative that we minimise the impact of any additional costs arising from the economic downturn on the education sector to ensure our children receive the standard of education they deserve.

Primary Schools: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action is being taken by her Department to reduce the gap between funding for primary schools and other sectors.

(AQW 5466/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá mé go hiomlán tiomanta – laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil – do leibhéal an chistithe a sholáthraítear do bhunscoileanna a mhéadú i gcoitinne agus dona chinntiú go dtaispeánfar ar bhonn níos fearr tábhacht an luath-idirghabhála agus na bunfhoghlama trí dháiliúchán cistithe chuig bunscoileanna.

I am fully committed – within available resources – to increasing the level of funding provided to primary schools in overall terms and ensuring that the funding distributed to primary schools better reflects the importance of early intervention and primary learning.

I have made provision for an increase in funding levels distributed to primary schools in 2008/09 under the Local Management of Schools funding arrangements with a view to progressively increasing this funding in both 2009-10 and 2010-11. Significant resources are being made available to primary schools, with an additional £32 million over the next three years, to support primary schools with the delivery of the foundation stage of the revised curriculum. A further £12 million is being made available specifically to help primary school teaching principals over the budget period.

Average Age of Teachers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what is the average age of teachers in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools, broken down by Education and Board areas. (AQW 5482/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an freagra sa tábla thíos.

The answer is given in the table below.

AVERAGE AGE¹ OF TEACHERS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND IN 2007-2008, BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AND PHASE OF EDUCATION

Education and Library Board	Sector	
	Primary ² schools	Post-primary schools
Belfast	40.9	40.4
Western	40.8	40.2
North Eastern	40.4	40.0
South Eastern	41.4	41.2
Southern	40.4	40.7
North of Ireland	40.8	40.5

1 Mean age (measured in whole years) as at 30 November 2007.

2 Includes teachers in preparatory departments of grammar schools.

School Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to (i) list; and (ii) give the value of each school project, for the current year and those planned for the next year. (AQW 5488/09)

The Minister of Education: Soláthraítear i dTábla A thíos na sonraíthe ar phríomhthionscadail caipitiúla scoile a bhfuil obair á déanamh faoi láthair orthu nó a bhfuil obair curtha i gcrích orthu sa bhliain airgeadais reatha.

Table A below provides details of major school capital projects where construction work is currently underway or has been completed in the current financial year.

Table B provides details of major capital school projects where it is currently estimated construction work will start on site in the 2009/10 financial year. This is of course subject to all the necessary planning and building processes being completed satisfactorily and the availability of resources in any particular year. It will be subject to, and take into account departmental policies such as area-based planning.

TABLE A

Projects Ongoing or Completed in 2008/09	£m
Ashfield Girls HS, Belfast - New replacement school	19.5
Bangor Academy - New replacement school	26.8
Boys Model, Belfast - New replacement school	29.2
Model School for Girls, Belfast - New replacement school	25.7
Grosvenor Grammar School, Belfast - New replacement school	22.8
Holy Cross College, Strabane - New replacement school	31.0
Orangefield PS, Belfast - New replacement school	5.7
St Cecilia's College - New replacement school	17.0
St Mary's College - New replacement school on new site	17.0

Projects Ongoing or Completed in 2008/09	£m
Pond Park P.S., Lisburn - New replacement school	3.9
Towerview P.S., Bangor – New replacement school	2.7
Victoria P.S., Ballyhalbert – New replacement school	1.6
Abbey G.S., Newry – New replacement school	17.2
Assumption G.S., Ballynahinch – Extension & Refurbishment	16.1
Ballinderry P.S. – New replacement school	2.7
Ballyholme P.S. Bangor – Extension & Refurbishment	3.8
Ballymacrickett P.S. Glenavy – New replacement school	3.4
Brookefield Special School, Moira – New replacement school	2.9
Burnfoot/Dungiven/Largy P.S. – New replacement school	1.1
De La Salle College, Belfast – New replacement school	15.2
Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh – New replacement school	10.0
Moorfields P.S., Ballymena – New replacement school	2.4
Mount Lourdes G.S., Enniskillen – Extension & Refurbishment	4.6
St Colman's College, Newry – Extension & Refurbishment	13.2
St Dominic's H.S., Belfast – Extension & Refurbishment	18.5
St Patrick's P.S. Saul – New replacement school	1.9
St Peter's P.S. Cloughreagh – New replacement school	3.8
Waringstown P.S. – Extension & Refurbishment	1.6
St Catherine's College, Armagh – Extension	0.6
Templepatrick P.S. – New replacement school	4.2
Lisbellaw P.S. – New replacement school	2.6
Lisnagelvin P.S. – New replacement school	5.4
St Patrick's & St Brigid's P.S. – New replacement school	4.2
Banbridge Academy – Extension & Refurbishment	15.7
Ravenscroft Nursery School – New replacement school	0.8
Glendhu Nursery School – New replacement school	0.6

TABLE B

Projects Expected to Commence in 2009/10	Estimated £m
Glenwood P.S. / Edenderry N.S., Belfast. – New replacement school	10.7
Our Lady's & St Patrick's GS, Knock- New replacement school	24.4
Springhill P.S., Belfast – New replacement school	3.2
St Joseph's PS, Carryduff - New replacement school	5.4
St Mary's PS, Portglenone - New replacement school	3.5
St Patrick's GS, Downpatrick - New replacement school	16.3
Strand / Sydenham P.S. Belfast – New replacement school	3.2
Strandtown P.S., Belfast – New replacement school	15.1
Taughmonagh PS, Belfast - New replacement school	2.2

Projects Expected to Commence in 2009/10	Estimated £m
Bangor G.S. – New replacement school	16.1
Coranny & Cornagague P.S. – New replacement school	1.5
Dean Maguire College, Carrickmore – New replacement school	11.1
Dromore Central P.S. – New replacement school	9.9
Edendork P.S. Dungannon – New replacement school	6.3
Foyle & Londonderry College – New replacement school	22.5
Glastry College Ballyhalbert – New replacement school	8.8
Knockbreda H.S. Belfast – New replacement school	11.7
Knockevin Special School, Downpatrick – New replacement school	5.2
Little Flower Girls S.S., Belfast – New replacement school	10.7
Lurgan College - New replacement school	10.6
Magherafelt H.S – New replacement school.	11.1
Parkhall College, Antrim – New replacement school and Youth Provision	14.7
Portadown College – New replacement school	16.0
Priory College, Holywood – New replacement school	10.5
St Columbanus College, Bangor – New replacement school and Youth Provision	15.0
St Columbkille's P.S. Carrickmore – New replacement school	2.7
St Joseph's Convent P.S. Newry – New replacement school	4.7
St Louis G.S. Kilkeel – New replacement school	12.2
St Mary's P.S. Banbridge – New replacement school	4.8
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon – New replacement school	17.6
St Patrick's College, Banbridge – New replacement school	10.4
Strathearn G.S. Belfast – New replacement school	16.4
Tannaghmore P.S. Lurgan – New replacement school	5.5
The High School Ballynahinch – New replacement school	10.5
Carrick P.S. Warrenpoint – New replacement school	3.8
Colaiste Feirste, – Extension & Refurbishment	13.0
Dromintee P.S. Killeavey – New replacement school	2.1
Magherafelt P.S. – New replacement school	4.3
Scoil Na Fuiseoige, Belfast – New replacement school	1.9
St Clare's Abbey P.S. Newry – New replacement school	9.2
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg – New replacement school	3.7
St Columba's P.S. Straw – New replacement school	1.9
St Joseph's P.S. Madden – New replacement school	1.6
St Mary's P.S., Newcastle – New replacement school	3.9
St Oliver Plunkett P.S. Forkhill – New replacement school	1.7
St Teresa's P.S. Lurgan – New replacement school	3.6
Whitehouse P.S. Newtownabbey – New replacement school	3.3

Development of Teachers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education the cost of the three year early professional development of teachers. (AQW 5505/09)

The Minister of Education: Léirítear sa tábla seo a leanas na costais inaitheanta a bhaineann leis an chlár 3 bliana um ionduchtú (bliain 1) agus Luathfhorbairt Ghairmiúil (EPD) (bliain 2 agus 3) do mhúinteoirí nua sa bhliain airgeadais 2007/2008.

The following table shows the identifiable costs of the 3 year programme of Induction (year 1) and Early Professional Development (EPD) (years 2 and 3) of beginning teachers in the 2007/2008 financial year.

2007/08	£000's
Induction	517
Early Professional Development	
(1) Education and Library Boards	314
(2) Higher Education Institutions	100
Total	931

Note: Staffing costs incurred by the 5 Education and Library Boards' Curriculum Advisory Support Service on Induction and EPD are excluded from the figures as they could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The years spent during Induction and EPD are central and essential to the continuing professional development of teachers. These two stages build upon the competences already acquired during initial teacher education and play an important part in developing both the confidence and competence of teachers starting out on their careers. Requiring EPD to be completed in only one year would put undue pressure and stress on all beginning teachers and the experienced teacher-tutors who support them, and cause special pressure and difficulties for those who are not in permanent or full-time employment.

The 3-year model of Induction and Early Professional Development here has been adopted by the Welsh Assembly.

Childhood Obesity

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the programmes and initiatives that her Department has launched to combat childhood obesity, in the last year; and to outline which ones she intends to launch in the coming year. (AQW 5507/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá géarthuiscint ag mo Roinn ar an ról atá aici maidir leis an chomhrac in aghaidh mhurtall na hóige agus bíonn sí gníomhach leis an Ghrúpa Stiúrtha um Chosc an Mhurtaill, treoraithe ag DHSSPS, agus na grúpaí comhairleacha a bhaineann leis.

My department is acutely aware of the significant role it has to play in combating childhood obesity and is active in the DHSSPS led Obesity Prevention Steering Group and all its advisory groups. The education system, both formal and informal and from early years upwards, is to the forefront in encouraging healthy lifestyles and providing children and young people with the foundations on which to build for active and healthy lives in the future.

During the last year my Department has continued to implement and support its Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and Other Food in Schools initiative. In March 2009 the Health Promotion Agency, in conjunction with the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, will launch a number of resources to encourage good eating habits and sound nutritional standards in schools. The Department will also be developing a marketing strategy to further promote the initiative by targeting the key groups involved and will be taking this forward in the autumn. In addition, the Department expects to consult soon on its draft Food in Schools policy.

In the last year I built on the successful introduction of the Curriculum Sports Programme in primary schools through expanding the programme, working with the GAA and IFA. There are now 60 coaches in primary schools working through this programme to develop the generic physical literacy skills of our youngest children and to support primary teachers in delivering PE. The programme is beneficial in getting children to be more

active and have healthier lifestyles, and links into other areas of learning within the curriculum. I will continue to build on the positive outcomes to date from this programme.

Development of Teachers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how much the early professional development of teachers would cost if its duration was one year, as in England and Wales. (AQW 5517/09)

The Minister of Education: Léirítear sa tábla seo a leanas na costais inaitheanta a bhaineann leis an chlár 3 bliana um ionduchtú (bliain 1) agus Luathfhorbairt Ghairmiúil (EPD) (bliain 2 agus 3) do mhúinteoirí nua sa bhliain airgeadais 2007/2008.

The following table shows the identifiable costs of the 3 year programme of Induction (year 1) and Early Professional Development (EPD) (years 2 and 3) of beginning teachers in the 2007/2008 financial year.

2007/08	£000's
Induction	517
Early Professional Development	
(1) Education and Library Boards	314
(2) Higher Education Institutions	100
Total	931

Note: Staffing costs incurred by the 5 Education and Library Boards' Curriculum Advisory Support Service on Induction and EPD are excluded from the figures as they could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The years spent during Induction and EPD are central and essential to the continuing professional development of teachers. These two stages build upon the competences already acquired during initial teacher education and play an important part in developing both the confidence and competence of teachers starting out on their careers. Requiring EPD to be completed in only one year would put undue pressure and stress on all beginning teachers and the experienced teacher-tutors who support them, and cause special pressure and difficulties for those who are not in permanent or full-time employment.

The 3-year model of Induction and Early Professional Development here has been adopted by the Welsh Assembly.

Rossmar Special School: Newbuild Facilities

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education when the planned newbuild facilities at Rossmar Special School will be completed. (AQW 5519/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair freagrach as pleanáil an fhoirgnimh scoile nua do Rossmore Special School.

The Western Education and Library Board has responsibility for planning of the proposed new school building for Rossmar Special School. The Board has advised that it is currently revising the economic appraisal for the project and has estimated that it will be spring 2011 before the planning process will be completed and construction work gets underway, with an estimated completion date of around autumn 2012.

Derry/Londonderry: Departmental Staff Travelling to Belfast for Work

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education how many employees in her Department travel from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast for work. (AQW 5526/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní oibríonn ach duine as gach céad de na daoine atá fostaithe ag an Roinn i mBéal Feirste agus ní thaistlíonn duine ar bith acu ó Dhoire.

Only 1% of my Department's employees work in Belfast and none travel from Derry.

Glenravel Primary School

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to confirm that a mobile building for administrative purposes will be provided for Glenravel Primary School; and when the installation will be completed. (AQW 5544/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá aontaithe ag an Roinn go bhfuil gá le cóiríocht bhreise shealadach ag an scoil le heasnamh oifige, seomra foirne agus saoráidí acmhainní a réiteach.

The Department has agreed that there is a need for additional temporary accommodation at the school to address a shortfall in office, staffroom and resource facilities. The scheme is currently at tender stage and it will be progressed early in the 2009/10 financial year and should be completed later that year.

Glenravel Primary School

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to confirm that a mobile classroom for teaching purposes will be provided for Glenravel Primary School; and to provide a timetable for the installation. (AQW 5545/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá rollú de 143 dalta ag an scoil faoi láthair, agus tá 3 sheomra ranga buana agus 3 sheomra ranga sealadacha ag an scoil.

The school currently has an enrolment of 143 pupils, the accommodation comprises of 3 permanent classrooms and 3 temporary classrooms. The existing accommodation at the school should be suitable for an enrolment of up to 145 pupils. The school has not made a request for additional teaching accommodation to the Department. The Department has agreed to provide additional temporary accommodation for other purposes.

Transfer 2010

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5227/09, if the legal advice she received from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, about the guidelines she announced in the Assembly on 2 February, 2009, is subject to freedom of information requests. (AQW 5559/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl aon ní ann a chuireann cosc ar iarratas saorála faisnéise leis an chomhairle dlí a fheiceáil. Dhéanfaí breithniú ar iarratas ar bith dá leithéid ag féachaint d'alt 42 den Freedom of Information Act 2000 a bhaineann le pribhléid ghairmiúil dlí.

There is nothing to preclude a freedom of information request for sight of this legal advice. Any such request would be considered with reference to section 42 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 which relates to legal professional privilege.

Irish Language

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education how many pupils' first language is Irish. (AQW 5560/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá 1,111 dalta ar scoileanna sa bhliain 2008/09 a raibh sé liostaithe go bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar theanga baile acu.

There are 1,111 pupils at schools in 2008/09 who have listed their home language as Irish.

Note: Figures relate to pupils in primary, post primary and special schools.

Source: Annual school census.

Provision of Multi-Sports Facilities

Mr N McCausland asked the Minister of Education for an update (i) on the transfer of the site at Beechmount Leisure Centre to Colaiste Feirste; and (ii) on the Provision of Multi-Sports Facilities: School and Community business plan. (AQW 5563/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá mo Roinn i mbun oibre le Coláiste Feirste agus le hoifigigh ó Chomhairle Cathrach Bhéal Feirste faoi láthair maidir le haistriú láithreán Shólann Ard na bhFeá chuig an scoil le háiseanna spóirt a sholáthar don scoil.

My Department is currently liaising with Coláiste Feirste and Belfast City Council officers on the transfer of the Beechmount Leisure Centre site to the school to allow for the provision of sports facilities at the school. An appraisal is being finalised on the project which will also take account of the school's intention to make its sports facilities available for use by the community.

Teachers from Protestant Backgrounds

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if she supports the principle of equality of opportunity for teachers from Protestant backgrounds; and if so, if she will be asking the OFMDFM to consider changing article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998. (AQW 5595/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugaim lántacaíocht do phrionsabal chomhionannas deiseanna do gach duine sa tsochaí. Áirítear air seo páistí agus daoine óga, múinteoirí agus fostaithe eile san earnáil oideachais.

I fully support the principle of equality of opportunity for all members of our society. This includes children and young people, teachers and other workers in the education sector.

To ensure there is equality in the Teaching sector I have decided to conduct a review of current and future recruitment opportunities in that sector. The review will be conducted by my officials working closely with, and involving, key stakeholders. The review will be completed by January 2010.

Once the review is completed, the need for additional action (and the type of action) will be fully assessed.

Entrance Examinations

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5204/09, to clarify her understanding of 'social justice, equality and excellence'. (AQW 5596/09)

The Minister of Education: I gcás Aistrithe 2010, tá leagtha amach agam sa treoir aidhmeanna agus cuspóirí atá le cur i bhfeidhm maidir leis an phróiseas aistrithe chuig iarbhunscoileanna:

For Transfer 2010 I have set out in guidance aims and objectives to be applied to the process of transfer to post-primary school:

- that admissions decisions are fair and give each child the opportunity to reach his/her full potential;
- that the overall arrangements for transfer, and within that the respective roles of the Department, the ELBs/ESA, primary schools and post-primary schools' Boards of Governors are clear and understood;
- that post-primary schools' Boards of Governors achieve robust and accurate admissions decisions.

The guidance reflects my policy not to include academic admissions criteria in the menu of admissions criteria. That is because I do not consider academic selection to be consistent with the objective of treating children fairly and giving each child the opportunity to fulfil her or his potential.

In addition to this overarching framework I would draw attention to my recommendation that all post-primary schools list as their first criterion for admission a commitment to admit children who are entitled to free school meals in numbers which reflect the proportion of first preference applications received from such children. The guidance also recommends that geographical criteria ("parish" and "catchment area") are used in conjunction with "nearest suitable school" as a means of ensuring that rural and outlying applicants are not disadvantaged by their address.

Taken as a whole, and if followed by all post-primary schools, the guidance offers an opportunity for socially just, equitable decisions to be made which will allow all children the opportunity to pursue excellence, whether that be via an academic or vocational education pathway or a combination of both.

Departmental Staff

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the location and number of staff in each of her Departmental offices, broken down by constituency. (AQW 5597/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá foireann 477 duine lonnaithe i dTeach Ráth Giall, Beannchar, atá mar chuid de thoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh agus tá foireann 120 duine lonnaithe i dTeach Thaobh an Uisce, Doire atá i dtoghcheantar an Fheabhail.

There are 477 staff in Rathgael House, Bangor, which is located in the North Down constituency and 120 staff in Waterside House, Derry, which is in the Foyle constituency.

Dromore High School

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Education what consideration she is giving to making Dromore High School an education provider for 11-18 year olds. (AQW 5687/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt ag déanamh breithnithe faoi láthair ar mholadh nua um séú bliain a bhunú in Dromore High School.

The Southern Education and Library Board are currently consulting on a new proposal to establish a sixth form at Dromore High School. I understand that the Board plan to publish a proposal in April. Publication of a proposal would initiate a statutory two month period when comments and objections can be submitted to my Department.

Email: Increasing Usage of

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5696/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá córais fhadhbhunaithe r-phoist ag mo Roinn agus nuair is féidir, bíonn baill foirne ag comhfhreagairt agus ag roinnt eolais ar bhonn leictreonach, go himheánach agus go seachtrach, le heagraíochtaí mar scoileanna, an earnáil oideachais i gcoiteann, laistigh den Roinn agus le Ranna eile an NICS chomh maith le daoine den phobal amuigh.

My Department has long established e-mail systems and where possible, staff correspond and share information electronically, both internally and externally, to organisations such as schools, the wider education sector, within DE, with other NICS Departments and members of the public.

In 2008 the Department introduced a records management system which allows staff to store and view electronic documents. Although a requirement to print material for meetings remains, staff are encouraged to print only when necessary.

In addition, Departmental publications are available on the website and the general public can contact DE via the Departmental electronic mail box.

Ards Borough Council: Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many complaints she has received from parents, through Board of Governors, in relation to post-primary transfer arrangements, in the Ards Borough Council, in the last twelve months. (AQW 5709/09)

The Minister of Education: Le dhá mhí dhéag anuas, ní bhfuair mé aon litreacha gearáin (trí Bhoird Gobarnóirí na Scoileanna) faoi shocrúithe an aistrithe iarbhunskoile ó thuismitheoirí a bhfuil a bpáistí ag freastal ar scoileanna laistigh de limistéar Chomhairle Buirge na hArda.

I have received no letters of complaint (through school Boards of Governors) about post-primary transfer arrangements within the last twelve months from parents whose children attend schools within the Ards Borough Council area.

Strangford: Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many complaints she has received from parents, through Board of Governors, in relation to post-primary transfer arrangements, in the Strangford constituency, in the last twelve months. (AQW 5710/09)

The Minister of Education: Le dhá mhí dhéag anuas, ní bhfuair mé aon litreacha gearáin (trí Bhoird Gobarnóirí na Scoileanna) faoi shocruithe an aistrithe iarbhunscoile ó thuismitheoirí a bhfuil a bpáistí ag freastal ar scoileanna laistigh de limistéar Thoghcheantar Loch Cuan.

I have received no letters of complaint (through school Boards of Governors) about post-primary transfer arrangements within the last twelve months from parents whose children attend schools within the Strangford constituency.

South Eastern Education and Library Board Area: Primary Schools

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many primary school children in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area are in composite classes, and what variation there has been in this figure, over the last five years. (AQW 5734/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table follows.

YEAR 1 – 7 CHILDREN IN COMPOSITE CLASSES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2004/05 – 2008/09

Year	Pupils in composite classes
2004/05	4,230
2005/06	4,284
2006/07	5,079
2007/08	4,532
2008/09	4,259

Source: school census in the north of Ireland.

Note:

1. Figures relate to pupils in composite classes with other Year 1 – 7 pupils.

Special Schools

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister of Education what action has been taken to strengthen the mechanism of the transition planning process in special schools to ensure that pupils are facilitated and supported until they leave school. (AQW 5752/09)

The Minister of Education: Bunaíodh Grúpa Idir-rannach (IDG) sa bhliain 2002 ina raibh an Roinn Oideachais, an Roinn Fostaíochta agus Foghlama, an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábhailteachta Poiblí páirteach le breithniú a dhéanamh ar an dóigh le feabhsuithe straitéiseacha sa phróiseas Aistrithe a dhéanamh do dhaoine óga a bhfuil Ráitis um Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais acu.

In 2002 an Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) involving the Departments of Education, Employment and Learning and Health, Social Services and Public Safety was established to consider how to make strategic improvements in the Transition process for young people with Statements of Special Educational Needs.

The Report and Action Plan of the Transitions IDG was published in 2006. It contained an action plan, which provides over 20 actions to address issues that were presented to the IDG. Recent monitoring indicates that all but one of the actions have now been met in full.

DE has provided the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) with a total of £1.86m to improve the transitions planning process through the appointment of education transitions co-ordinators and for appropriate life skills

training for independent living. A further £100k per annum was secured from the Children and Young People's Funding Package in 2006/07 and 2007/08 to further enhance life skills training. With this funding ELBs have enabled over 370 pupils to participate in Life Skills Training Programmes to improve self-help and independent living skills.

In addition DE is heading a sub - group of the Ministerial Sub - committee on Children and Young People. Membership of the sub-group includes a number of departments and the Juvenile Justice Centre and the focus is

“Provision for children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools, including transitions to adulthood and the provision of appropriate health and social care interventions.”

The sub-group is currently developing an action plan, to be implemented by all participating Departments, which will contain actions to further strengthen policy delivery and post school provision.

Foreign Language Courses

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if she plans to introduce ‘teaching English as a foreign language courses for teachers to assist them in teaching children from non-English speaking households.

(AQW 5757/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn sé mar aidhm ag cúrsaí ‘Múineadh an Bhéarla mar theanga iasachta’ (TEFL) oiliúint a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí atá ag múineadh Béarla i dtír nach bhfuil Béarla mar phríomhtheanga aici, nó atá ag múineadh Béarla i scoileanna teanga a chuireann cúrsaí ar fáil do dhaoine fásta agus do pháistí.

The ‘teaching of English as a foreign language’ (TEFL) courses are designed to train teachers who are teaching English either in a country where English is not the first language, or in language schools offering courses to adults and children.

As TEFL is comparable with foreign languages’ curricula in schools it is inappropriate to the education of newcomer pupils. Some teachers who have taken TEFL courses have found that they do not meet their professional development needs as they have not helped them make the curriculum accessible to newcomer pupils.

Teachers need training and support on language development and acquisition in the context of the school curriculum here, as their role is to help newcomer pupils access the curriculum. The Inclusion and Diversity Service is engaged in this task through programmes of regional in-service training provision and support services, which are based on the ‘Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School’.

Other support services, which the IDS offers to schools, are diversity coordinators, interpreting and translating services and a multi-lingual website for teachers and newcomer parents.

In addition, the Service will focus on such areas as a new toolkit for post-primary schools, intercultural awareness, the development and production of dual language texts, home/school/community links and the development of the European language portfolio for primary and post-primary schools etc.

Cultural Issues

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to provide a list of Departmental consultees on cultural issues.

(AQW 5775/09)

The Minister of Education: Coinníonn mo Roinn liosta comhairlí a mbaintear úsáid astu i ndáil leis an scéim chomhionannais. Níl liosta ar leith maidir le ceisteanna cultúrtha.

My Department maintains a list of consultees for use in connection with its equality scheme. There is not a specific list in relation to cultural issues.

The nature of the policy under review, and its relevance to any particular body, or interest group, determines which organisations are consulted on any given policy.

Equality Issues

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to provide a list of Departmental consultees on equality issues.

(AQW 5776/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá 652 comhairlí ar liosta comhairliúcháin chomhionannais faoi láthair.

The full equality consultation list currently consists of 652 consultees.

The nature of the policy under review, and its relevance to any particular body or interest group determines which organisations are actually consulted on any given policy.

I have arranged for a copy of the current equality consultation list to be placed in the Assembly library.

Strangford College

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education whether Strangford College's need for additional classrooms will be addressed as a priority. (AQW 5788/09)

The Minister of Education: D'aontaigh an Roinn go bhfuil gá ann le cóiríocht shealadach bhreise bheith ag an scoil ionas go ndíreofar isteach ar easnamh áiseanna don séú bliain. Cuirfear tús leis an scéim go luath sa bhliain airgeadais 2009/10.

The Department has agreed that there is a need for additional temporary accommodation at the school to address a shortfall in sixth form facilities. The scheme will be progressed early in the 2009/10 financial year.

CCEA Test Paper

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4824/09, if she would publish the correspondence she received from the (i) Governing Bodies Association; (ii) the Catholic Heads Association; and (iii) the Commission for Catholic Education, in connection with using a CCEA paper. (AQW 5826/09)

The Minister of Education: Is ceist a bhaineann leis na heagraíochtaí aonair i cé acu a shocraíonn siad a gcomhfhreagras a scaipeadh ar bhonn níos forleithne. Níl rún agam an comhfhreagras a fhoilsiú.

It is a matter for these individual organisations to decide whether they wish to share their correspondence with me more widely. I do not intend publishing the correspondence.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5234/09, in which part of her answers to AQW 2259/09 and AQW 2260/09 did she indicate whether her new guidance for schools obliges schools operating the Dickson Plan to refrain from using academic criteria for transfer. (AQW 5827/09)

The Minister of Education: Mínítear sa chéad alt den fhreagra a thug mé do na ceisteanna a cuireadh ní ba luaithe go bhfuil an seasamh céanna i gceist maidir le scoileanna laistigh de limistéar an Dickson Plan agus atá i gceist le gach scoil eile.

The first paragraph of my combined answer to those earlier questions explains that the position pertaining to schools within the Dickson Plan area is the same as that for all other schools.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5235/09, if the factual description of the legal context in which post-primary admissions will operate for Transfer 2010 includes a ban on the use of academic criteria. (AQW 5828/09)

The Minister of Education: The Transfer 2010 guidance is clear on this point.

Paragraph 10 of the guidance states: "prior to 2010, the admissions criteria that a post-primary schools' Board of Governors could consider using for their school were governed by Article 16 of the Education Order (NI) 1997 and admissions criteria regulations drawn up by the Department under the same Article; but due to the replacement of this Article, its supporting regulations will lapse for the admissions process from 2010 onwards."

Sonraítear i bParagraf 11: “laistigh de na dualgais agus na freagrachtaí reachtúla leanúnacha...beidh sé dleathach do Bhord Gobharnóirí iarbhunscoile aon chritéar iontrála a úsáid seachas na critéir sin a bhfuil cosc orthu níos ginearálta trí reachtaíocht comhionannais.”

Paragraph 11 states: “within their continuing statutory duties and responsibilities...it will be legal for a post-primary school’s Board of Governors to use any admissions criteria except those prohibited more generally by equality legislation.”

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5562/09, in relation to her guidelines of 24 February, if a school is legally permitted to proceed with plans to utilise academic criteria for post-primary transfer from 2010 onwards. (AQW 5829/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an treoir a foilsíodh i ndiaidh mo ráitis chuig an Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 cur síos fíriciúil ar an chomhthéacs dleathach ina n-oibreoidh iontrálacha iarbhunscoile d’Aistriú 2010. Éilítear ar scoileanna “aire a thabhairt” ar an treoir.

The guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly provides a factual description of the legal context within which post-primary admissions will operate for Transfer 2010. Schools are required to “have regard to” the guidance.

For schools to “have regard to” the guidance means that they cannot disregard it. It means that the guidance is an important document for them to consider in developing their admissions criteria and in performing their role within the admissions process. The Department strongly recommends that any post-primary school Board of Governors that is considering using academic admissions criteria and, therefore, an independent assessment mechanism or “Entrance Test”, as a basis for admissions in 2010, should be very mindful of the need for a robust assessment mechanism capable of providing for sound ability-based admissions decisions.

If a Board of Governors does not comply with its duty to “have regard to” guidance issued by the Department under Article 16B of the Education Order 1997 (as amended by Article 30 of the Education Order 2006), the Department can consider issuing a direction under Article 101 of the 1986 Order directing them to do so.

I have asked all post-primary schools to consider the guidance carefully and adhere to its recommendations. If that request is listened to and acted upon Transfer 2010 will become one of the key building blocks of reform resulting in a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence that treats all of our children equally.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5562/09, if any part of her guidance can be used to prevent a school from using academic criteria for post-primary transfer from 2010. (AQW 5839/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an treoir a foilsíodh i ndiaidh mo ráitis chuig an Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 cur síos fíriciúil ar an chomhthéacs dleathach ina n-oibreoidh iontrálacha iarbhunscoile d’Aistriú 2010. Éilítear ar scoileanna “aire a thabhairt” ar an treoir.

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I have asked all post-primary schools to consider the guidance carefully and adhere to its recommendations. If that request is listened to and acted upon Transfer 2010 will become one of the key building blocks of reform resulting in a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence that treats all of our children equally.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5561/09, given her public position that any school which proceeds with plans to utilise academic criteria, and ignores her transfer guidance, helps to ‘perpetuate the inequalities associated with the outgoing arrangements and risks creating dysfunction within the overall admissions process’, what powers are available to her to prevent schools from introducing academic selection. (AQW 5859/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an treoir a foilsíodh i ndiaidh mo ráitis chuig an Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 cur síos fíriciúil ar an chomhthéacs dleathach ina n-oibreoidh iontrálacha iarbhunscoile d’Aistriú 2010. Éilítear ar scoileanna “aire a thabhairt” ar an treoir.

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I have asked all post-primary schools to consider the guidance carefully and adhere to its recommendations. If that request is listened to and acted upon Transfer 2010 will become one of the key building blocks of reform resulting in a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence that treats all of our children equally.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Job Vacancies

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many job vacancies are available to people seeking employment and how many of these vacancies are (i) full; or (ii) part time. (AQW 5320/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Employment Service operates a job vacancy service which holds information on vacancies notified to the Department. These vacancies do not represent the total number of vacancies available to jobseekers in Northern Ireland.

On Friday 20 February my Department had 1,554 live vacancies, containing 3,190 positions displayed on the Department’s job vacancy system used by JobCentres/Jobs & Benefit offices across Northern Ireland. The Department uses the term ‘vacancy’ to describe a single advertisement of one or more positions, by an employer and the term ‘positions’ to describe the actual number of jobs available.

Of the 3,190 jobs available, 2,096 were full-time jobs and 1,094 were part-time jobs.

Maritime Coastal Agency

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the Maritime Coastal Agency’s compliance with the Employment Act 2002 (Dispute Resolution) Regulations 2004. (AQW 5325/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I assume the member is referring to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and to the Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 (Dispute Resolution) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004.

The regulations establish in statute a three step procedure for handling a range of formal grievances and disciplinary/dismissal situations in the workplace. Failure to adhere to the steps can have implications for subsequent proceedings before an industrial tribunal or the Fair Employment Tribunal.

If employers do not adhere to the statutory requirements in situations where the regulations specify that they should, it is open to employees to bring a complaint to an industrial tribunal or the Fair Employment Tribunal. Tribunals have the power to take account of an employer's failure to follow the statutory procedures. In some cases, this can mean an increase in any award made to the employee. In the most serious cases, the tribunal can reach an automatic finding that the employee has been unfairly dismissed.

I trust that the member will bring to the attention of anyone who may have a complaint about a particular employer that there is a legal mechanism whereby their complaint can be heard and dealt with.

Departmental Staff with Disabilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number and percentage of employees in his Department who have disabilities. (AQW 5372/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on the number of staff who have disabilities is collected for equality monitoring purposes by the Department of Finance and Personnel, on behalf of all NICS Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will therefore be responding on behalf of all Departments.

Maritime Coastal Agency

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what employment rights do workers with the Maritime Coastal Agency have. (AQW 5409/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I assume the member is referring to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The employment rights of workers with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency do not differ from the rights of workers employed elsewhere in Northern Ireland, although it is possible that differing contractual arrangements above and beyond the statutory requirements may apply.

Comprehensive information on a range of employment rights is available on my Department's website at www.delni.gov.uk/erpublications.

The member may also be aware that the Labour Relations Agency operates a helpline service which is available to employers, employees, trade unions and others and provides clear, confidential, independent and impartial advice to assist the caller in resolving issues in the workplace. While the helpline advisors cannot provide a legal opinion they can help callers gain a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities as well as identifying possible options to help resolve their issues.

Stranmillis College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many individuals conducted the interviews for the current Board of Governors at Stranmillis College. (AQW 5419/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In accordance with The Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland's (OCPA NI) Code of Practice, interviews for those members of the current Board of Governors at Stranmillis University College nominated by my Department were conducted by three individuals. These were, the Chair of the Governing Body, a Senior Officer from my Department's Higher Education Division and an independent OCPA NI assessor.

The current Chairman of the Governing Body, Mr Stephen Costello, self-nominated for the publicly advertised post. His written application was considered by a panel consisting of the Senior Officer from Higher Education Division, the then Acting Chair of the Stranmillis Governing Body and the independent OCPA NI assessor. The

panel fully supported the nomination. In line with OCPA NI guidance, Mr Costello was informally interviewed by the Senior Officer from Higher Education Division before a recommendation was made to the Direct Rule Minister, Barry Gardiner MP, that he be appointed Chairman of the Governing Body.

In accordance with the Colleges of Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 and the College's Instrument of Government, the Academic Staff Representative and the Support Staff Representative on the Governing Body are elected from within the College. The Principal of the College and the President of the Students' Union are members of the Governing Body by virtue of their office.

Apprenticeships

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to ensure that job and apprenticeship opportunities are not subject to further reductions. (AQW 5431/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is focused on ensuring that training, aimed at providing the skills required to compete for employment, is there for anyone who wishes to avail of it. Programmes like Steps to Work, Pathways and the new all-age apprenticeship provision, ApprenticeshipsNI, have been introduced to equip people with the necessary skills for employment.

In addition to these measures, we will continue to work closely with local bodies across Northern Ireland such as District Councils, Chambers of Commerce and employers in an effort to bring jobs to the local community. Through taking a multi-agency approach to tackling this problem we can work together to enhance the short and long-term prospects of those people affected.

My Department works in partnership with employers to assist them to fill vacancies and to encourage them to train and upskill the existing workforce. It also continually assesses the services and 'back to work' provision available for unemployed clients to help them move towards and into employment.

Allied to my these actions to ensure continued job and apprentice opportunities, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI continue to work closely with Northern Ireland's manufacturing and tradable services companies to improve their productivity, helping them to become more internationally competitive and successful. This intervention is even more important now as we continue to move through a downturn in the economic cycle. Invest NI has initiated a number of remedial actions to help clients to trade through these challenges avoiding further reductions. In particular, these actions focus on the areas of cash flow management, cost reduction, product development, exports and improving production efficiency.

Ultimately, the long term goal of assisting Northern Ireland's companies to improve their productivity through moving up the value chain and achieving international success should result in an increase in the number of value added employment opportunities, including apprenticeships, available to the whole community.

Apprenticeships

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprenticeships are available, and where these are located, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5434/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In 2007, the Department issued contracts to a number of different Training Suppliers in Northern Ireland, to ensure the provision of occupational training for any employer who wished to take on an apprentice. These contracts were issued to a Training Supplier(s) in each of 26 different contract management areas (approximately equivalent to district council areas). This approach ensures that training in all occupational areas is available throughout Northern Ireland.

ApprenticeshipsNI, the Department's Apprenticeship provision, is an employer-led programme. This means that the Department does not specify, or put a limit on, an amount of apprenticeships that are available in Northern Ireland. Instead, if an employer wishes to employ an apprentice within a particular occupational area, then the employer need only approach the Training Supplier who has been contracted to deliver training for that occupational sector, within the management area where the employer is based. Where this is the case, the Department will fund the apprenticeship.

The Department currently has a total of 10,271 apprentices on training provision. Whilst this information cannot, unfortunately, be broken down by parliamentary constituency, we can break it down into the following geographical categories, where the apprentices have their home addresses:

Belfast	County Antrim	County Armagh	County Down	County Fermanagh	County Londonderry	County Tyrone	Republic of Ireland
1,987	2,412	1,281	1,517	528	1,229	1,272	45

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of his current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to his Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5464/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Executive is committed to doing all it can to protect local people and business from the worst effects of the economic downturn. Its importance is demonstrated by the fact that the economic downturn is a standing item of Executive business.

The downturn has resulted in a sharp increase in the levels of unemployment which in turn has led to more people wanting to avail of the services which my Department offers to those searching for new employment opportunities. In response, work has been reprioritised to provide additional support to these frontline services, operational capacity has been increased. In addition, 23 new Careers Advisers recruited in line with the new Strategy for Careers Education, Information and Guidance, have also been bolstering the services available. Processes have been reviewed and improved to facilitate a rapid response and, where necessary, measures such as overtime and Saturday opening have been used. The impact of continuing changes to the unemployment pattern are being constantly monitored to make sure needs are being met.

In addition, the Department has noted that the number of apprenticeships being recruited is falling in sectors relating to the construction trades and that some have been made redundant. The Department has responded by introducing contingency arrangements to allow apprentices who were made redundant from the construction, engineering and motor vehicle sectors to continue with their training. These sectors have been the most severely affected by the downturn, but my Department is monitoring the situation in other sectors and will, if necessary introduce similar arrangements.

My Department is also seeking to support employers as they try to maintain their competitive edge at this time. This support includes funding training for up to 500 employers in business improvement techniques and other seminars, and masterclasses to help them maintain high performance. Listening to employers is important at this time as we seek to ensure the skills available match with employers' current needs.

The Further Education sector is helping in this process in upskilling and retraining redundant workers. Further Education Colleges also offer employers, especially small and medium sized enterprises, support with innovation, product design and manufacture. Workforce skills training is also available to help minimise inefficiencies and enhance competitiveness. Work continues on a range of projects funded from £83 million capital investment in colleges.

Higher education is also contributing through research and innovation. Additional funding of £2.7 million has been provided to support two further projects under the "Strengthening the all-island Research Base" programme. The projects are focused on sustainability of transport and cancer medicinal chemistry.

The Northern Ireland European Social Fund expenditure and performance targets are also being reviewed to take account of the impact of the downturn on planned expenditure and to consider any amendments which might enable the Programmes better to respond to the economic situation.

Capital Investment Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all college capital investment projects (i) for this year and (ii) planned for next year, and the value of the each investment. (AQW 5503/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Further Education sector is in the process of delivering a number of capital projects and these are in various stages of delivery. The design and delivery of such projects is normally spread across a number of years. All of the further education projects being delivered in 2008/9 and

2009/10 are across both years and some are spread across three years. The table sets out the projects and the respective capital values.

Project Title	Location	Contract Value (£m)
South Eastern Regional College – East Down – PPP	Downpatrick Newcastle Ballynahinch	24
South West College – Fermanagh	Enniskillen	8
South Eastern Regional College –PPP	Lisburn	20
North West Regional College – Strand Road	L/Derry	14
Northern Regional College	Newtownabbey	8
South Eastern Regional College	Newtownards	5
South Eastern Regional College	Bangor	13
Belfast Metropolitan College - City Centre - PPP	Belfast	44
Belfast Metropolitan College - Springvale E3	Belfast	14

Royal National Institute for the Blind

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many meetings he has had with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, and the outcomes. (AQW 5605/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: To date, I have had no meetings with the Royal National Institute for the Blind in my capacity as Minister for Employment and Learning. However, I attended the launch of the RNIB's Employability and Skills Project in June 2008.

My Department has worked closely with the RNIB, which delivers a range of programmes on its behalf. Departmental officials are participating in RNIB's new "Vision Strategy Implementation (Northern Ireland) Group".

People with Disabilities in Further Education

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what methods he is examining to bring people with a disability into further education to improve their opportunities in gaining employment. (AQW 5606/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The right to education for people with a disability is protected by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 and my Department has put in place a number of measures to help Colleges meet their responsibilities under the legislation. These include providing assistance with the cost of technical and personal support for learners with disabilities; additional funding for tailored courses for students who cannot attend mainstream classes; and capital funding to improve physical access to college premises for people with disabilities.

My Department is currently reviewing provision for students with disabilities, especially for those with learning difficulties who are unable to access mainstream courses. All Colleges are required to take account of the needs of students with disabilities and good practice in this area is promoted throughout the Further Education sector.

Further Education provision is generally accessible to people with a disability and in 2006/07, the last year for which figures are available, there were 16,856 enrolments of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These enrolments span the full range of Further Education provision, including skills courses to prepare students for employment.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Podcast Initiative

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why there is a delay by her Department, in clearing the script for the pod cast initiative on which the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the NITB and the Local Belfast Partnership Boards, worked; and what is the time-scale for its clearance. (AQW 5034/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): It is important that the scripts to be used for any podcasts relating to the history of Belfast provide an accurate, balanced and informative commentary of events and characters. I believe that this has not been achieved with a number of the scripts produced for the podcasts.

I propose to give the issue my fullest consideration and ensure that these objectives have been achieved before agreeing the final version. I aim to reach a conclusion on how to proceed before the end of March.

European Commission State Aid Application

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if Coleraine was mentioned as a possible site for the telehouse in the application for European Commission state aid approval. (AQW 5360/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The European Commission State Aid application seeks approval for a project to bring a direct international communications link into the North West of Ireland. The application does not specifically mention a telehouse.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of her current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to her Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5406/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Current global economic conditions clearly present us with significant challenges. In particular, the economic slowdown is having an impact on the demand for goods and services, both in Northern Ireland and further afield. Key markets, such as Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and the United States are feeling the effects of the slowdown, and this will reduce the demand for our exports.

Invest NI is also seeing evidence of a reduction in business development activity across all sectors in terms of its current levels of work-in-progress. This suggests a mood of caution, with clients deciding to defer, or slow down, investment plans. This extends beyond our indigenous business base with the early-stage pipeline of new Foreign Direct Investment prospects also significantly reduced in comparison to the same point last year.

I am very aware of the immediate challenges local businesses are facing, and my Department, through Invest NI, has taken a number of steps to provide urgently needed assistance. A £5m Accelerated Support Fund has been established to offer targeted support during the current economic difficulties. Invest NI has also conducted a series of seminars for both client and non-client companies. These are designed to provide the local business community with specific advice and guidance on dealing with the current economic climate and its impact.

Furthermore, in my capacity as Chair of the Economic Development Forum, I established a sub-group of the Forum to consider what additional measures the Executive could be take to help businesses at this time. The sub-group reported to me on 12 February 2009, and put forward a number of proposals which are currently under consideration.

My view is that alongside helping businesses cope with the short term problems, we need to keep focused on addressing the longer term needs of the economy, as outlined in the Programme for Government – in particular, improving the value added nature of the private sector and strengthening its productivity performance. We need to continue to strengthen our competitive position, so that Northern Ireland is well placed to take advantage of the opportunities that arise when the global economy begins to strengthen.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she can ensure that the research carried out by KPMG will look at the impact of the removal of the 'Start a Small Business Programme' grant in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas; and that the review will consider how the re-introduction of a higher level of grant would help their targets in these Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. (AQW 5441/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The decision to remove the £400 grant from the Start a Business Programme (SABp) was taken as a result of recommendations emerging from an independent evaluation which highlighted serious concerns around its additionality and value for money.

An independent review has just been carried out by KPMG and Oxford Economics in an attempt to determine the specific grant impact on the level of business start-ups both at overall programme level and then broken down to factors such as by individual council and TSN areas.

Whilst there has been a decrease in Targeting Social Need (TSN) activities within SABp over recent months, this is largely in line with overall participation levels

I am currently considering the full findings of the report.

Wind Farms

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of electricity produced by wind farms in each of the past five years. (AQW 5500/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The amount of electricity produced (in Gigawatt hours - GWh) by Northern Ireland wind farms in each of the last 5 years is as follows.

Years	GWh
2004-2005	241
2005-2006	266
2006-2007	335
2007-2008	428
2008-2009 (to end January)	467

Derry/Londonderry: Civil Service Staff

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many Civil Service employees there are in her Department in Derry/Londonderry (AQW 5528/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment has 2 Trading Standards Service employees based in Londonderry.

Derry/Londonderry: Departmental Staff Travelling to Belfast for Work

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many employees in her Department travel from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast for work. (AQW 5529/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: No employees of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment travel from Londonderry to Belfast for work.

Project Kelvin

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the technical solution proposed by Hibernia Atlantic for Project Kelvin will guarantee 99.999% availability between the three mandatory locations (Derry/Londonderry, Letterkenny and Monaghan) and New York; and how this will be achieved. (AQW 5581/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The technical solution proposed by Hibernia guarantees 99.999% availability between all the mandatory locations (including Londonderry, Letterkenny and Monaghan) and New York.

The performance of the network will be monitored until the contract ends in 2018. There are penalties in the contract if Hibernia fail to meet this or any of the other performance targets in the contract.

Project Kelvin

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what terrestrial connection is proposed by Hibernia Atlantic for Project Kelvin between the submarine landing point and the telehouse facility in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5582/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The terrestrial connections between the cable landing point and the telehouse will be by fibre optic cable.

Project Kelvin

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what dark fibre services will be available through the technical solution proposed by Hibernia Atlantic for Project Kelvin between the Telehouse in Derry/Londonderry and the Letterkenny and Monaghan mandatory locations. (AQW 5583/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It will be possible for companies to buy a dark fibre link from the mandatory locations in Letterkenny and Monaghan to the telehouse. It is not a condition of the contract that dark fibre must be made available at any other locations.

Reducing Stress in the Workplace

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment given that stress is the primary reason for absence at work, to outline what actions her Department intends to bring forward to increase motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5645/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has adopted and will continue to adopt a range of actions available to all departments to combat stress in the workplace. The Department recognises that psychiatric and psychological illnesses, which include stress, anxiety and depression are the main reasons for long term sickness absence in the NICS.

Measures are in place to help staff who experience such difficulties including the promotion of work life balance, healthy lifestyle programmes and a Workplace Health Improvement Programme. In addition, staff can avail of the support of the Occupational Health Service, welfare support and an employee assistance programme. The latter is available by telephone 24/7 for staff and immediate family members.

The Department recognises that early intervention in stress cases is essential and immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service is and will continue to be made when required.

The Department will be participating fully in a future NICS-wide stress survey. The survey will contain substantial sections on both stress within the workplace and non work related stress. Actions from the survey will be aimed at identifying underlying trends for stress in the Department and any hotspots for specific targeting of preventative measures and assistance, for example in terms of job design and flexible working arrangements.

The Department recently circulated a factsheet on mental health issues to all staff and will be following this with a revised "Mental Wellbeing" policy which is currently under review in DFP. The aim is to create a much greater awareness about mental health at work and provide all DETI staff with detailed guidance on tackling stress.

Email: Increasing Usage of

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of email. (AQW 5695/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI has implemented a range of policies and systems to reduce the amount of paper documentation used both internally and in communication with others. Use is made of electronic storage for the Department's records utilising the NICS-wide RECORDS NI system. This system is available to all staff in the Department who are required to use it instead of paper-based filing. Some original copies of documents, which are required for auditing or legal purposes are still requested and are held in paper format. The Department also utilises the NICS-wide financial accounting system, ACCOUNT NI, which has introduced electronic payments and transaction processing in lieu of a paper based system. Similarly the introduction of the new personnel system, HRCONNECT, has provided the medium to hold and promulgate HR policies and to transact HR matters electronically, including storage of personal records.

Communications to staff are predominately made through the Department's internal intranet and communication externally is via the Department's Internet website. In addition, extensive use is made of e-mail both internally and externally. All staff use e-mail and are encouraged to attach electronic versions of documents and letters rather than sending hard copies. All e-mails generated by DETI staff contain the phrase 'Please consider the environment - do you really need to print this e-mail?' The Department also adheres to the OFMDFM guidance on distribution of departmental publications and consultation documents that requires some recipients, including political representatives, parliamentary contacts and Legal Deposit and other libraries, to be provided with hard copy format, but encourages other recipients to be directed to an electronic format. The Department has, where it is value for money, also introduced electronic processes for transacting business with its customers, for example by Companies Registry and the Insolvency Service, and for a range of statistical surveys with businesses.

ERINI Report

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the Finance Minister's statement 'That report has no standing whatsoever with the Executive' as recorded in Hansard, Volume 38, no 2 dated Tuesday 17th February 2009, in reference to the ERINI report published February 2009. (AQW 5698/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I fully concur with the remarks made by the Finance Minister on this issue.

As I have recently commented in my Department's Quarterly Economic Review, the large public sector in Northern Ireland has historically tended to help insulate the economy from the worst effects of recession. This is a key factor which should help to ensure that Northern Ireland is no worse affected by the downturn than other UK regions.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications for Quarries

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for quarries have been refused in the past 10-years. (AQW 5311/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): The number of applications refused and received, for each of the years for which my Department has reliable information, is set out in the table below.

Business Year	Numbers			
	Received ¹	Decided ²	Approved	Refused
2002/03	55	49	44	5
2003/04	57	39	30	9

Business Year	Numbers			
	Received ¹	Decided ²	Approved	Refused
2004/05	43	31	28	3
2005/06	47	38	37	1
2006/07	41	24	23	1
2007/08	44	30	29	1
2008/09*	36	15	12	3

* latest figures available up to 30 September 2008

1 All applications received in the year may not have had a decision issued within the same time period and applications decided in the year may not have been received in the same time period. Therefore direct comparisons between the figures can not be made. Applications received also include withdrawn applications.

2 Applications decided do not include withdrawn applications

Source: 02/03 to 08/09 Q2 Planning Service frozen databases.

Statistical information for the period up to end December 2008 will be available in March 2009.

Planning Applications for Quarries

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for quarries have been received in the past 10-years. (AQW 5312/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of applications refused and received, for each of the years for which my Department has reliable information, is set out in the table below.

Business Year	Numbers			
	Received ¹	Decided ²	Approved	Refused
2002/03	55	49	44	5
2003/04	57	39	30	9
2004/05	43	31	28	3
2005/06	47	38	37	1
2006/07	41	24	23	1
2007/08	44	30	29	1
2008/09*	36	15	12	3

* latest figures available up to 30 September 2008

1 All applications received in the year may not have had a decision issued within the same time period and applications decided in the year may not have been received in the same time period. Therefore direct comparisons between the figures can not be made. Applications received also include withdrawn applications.

2 Applications decided do not include withdrawn applications

Source: 02/03 to 08/09 Q2 Planning Service frozen databases.

Statistical information for the period up to end December 2008 will be available in March 2009.

Tullyvar Landfill Site, Aughnacloy

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment if the proposed increase of the Tullyvar landfill site in Aughnacloy meets the EU directives that it should be 0.5km from housing. (AQW 5363/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no proposals to increase the size of the Tullyvar landfill site in Aughnacloy.

PPS 21

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications are being assessed under PPS21, that were submitted before the introduction of PPS21. (AQW 5397/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently reassessing all applications that were submitted before the introduction of PPS 21. This includes all those applications that were deferred as a result of the now obsolete draft Planning Policy Statement 14. The total number of applications being reassessed by the Agency is 2278. The breakdown by Division is as follows:

Divisional Planning Office	Total No. of applications previously deferred due to dPPs 14
Ballymena	335
Craigavon	711
Londonderry / Coleraine	267
Belfast	18
Downpatrick	158
Omagh / Enniskillen	789
Agency Total	2278

The previously deferred applications are being reconsidered by application type and date received e.g. replacement dwellings, off site replacements, dwellings on farms, special circumstances cases. Where appropriate, Divisional Offices are contacting applicants to determine whether any additional information is necessary to enable full assessment of the proposal under draft PPS 21.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of his current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to his Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5461/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The current downturn in the local construction industry has had a direct impact on the number of planning applications received in my Department. Fee income derived from planning applications for the year ending 31 March 2009 is likely to be £16.7m, down £4.5m (or 21%) on fee income generated in the year ended 31 March 2008 (£21.3m).

As the Department's net budget, and therefore funding from DFP, is based upon receiving planning income in the current financial year of circa £21m, the Departmental Board has had to apply some reductions to the budgets of all the Department's business areas. As the Department received £2m from DFP at the December Monitoring round to help meet this shortfall in planning income, the reductions proposed by the Board need to deliver some £2.5m to cover in full the total expected shortfall (£4.5m). In the main these reductions for 2008/09 have been applied to:

- the salary budgets of most business areas for by not filling
- vacancies and cutting back on overtime and non-salary running costs (£0.47m);
- grant spend in respect of environmental protection and farming conservation practices (£0.5m);
- advertising, development plans and land registry costs in the Planning Service (£0.58m); and
- the Local Government Reform initiative (0.46m).

Additionally even if a planning application is approved it may not be implemented due to funding difficulties or changes in the market (e.g. demand for housing). There have also been a number of instances where development has started but has not been completed which has clear environmental and amenity impacts in urban and rural areas.

While no significant changes have been made to existing policies and practices to address these effects, my Department continues to work towards fulfilling the commitments set out in the Programme for Government (PfG), which places the economy as its top priority. The PfG refers to a six month target being applied to large scale planning proposals where pre-application discussions (PADs) have taken place. These are proposals which

are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland. Two Strategic Projects teams have been created to specifically handle these types of applications.

Those applications which do not fall within this category will still be given priority within the planning system in terms of their processing and measures are already in place to this effect. Guidance on prioritisation was issued to all Divisional Offices in July 2006 clarifying that priority should be given to applications on which grant-aid may depend, as well as to certain commercial, industrial, social, and infrastructure proposals which have a clear strategic, employment, community or public interest dimension.

In general terms my Department is committed to managing the impact of the economic downturn in the context of the Executive's collective approach to the situation. The Executive is committed to doing all that it can to protect local people and business from the worst effects of the economic downturn and the issue is a standing item of Executive Business. The package of measures agreed by the Executive and announced on 15 December 2008 is part of a continuing monitoring and response initiative. The current priorities of the PfG remain valid and while the economic context is currently much more difficult than could have been anticipated, I remain committed to delivering on the relevant PfG commitments.

Street Lighting

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how will he ensure that developers provide adequate street lighting and roads in new developments, to allow the developments to be adapted. (AQW 5498/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the determination of planning applications, my Department consults the Department for Regional Development (DRD) Roads Service which has responsibility for the adoption of roads and the provision of street lighting.

As part of the planning application process, developers indicate on the plans submitted for approval those areas that are to be adopted for future maintenance by the Roads Service. That Service agrees these as part of the planning process but the adoption of the streets is made under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 and the Private Streets (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 which provide the statutory basis for adoption. Developers will normally need to enter into formal agreements/bonds with Roads Service so that, on completion, the roads become highways maintainable at the public expense.

The provision and maintenance of street lighting is solely a matter for DRD Roads Service and the developers.

Water Framework Directive

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his work with the Republic of Ireland government to implement the Water Framework Directive in the North-Western and Neagh-Bann river basin districts. (AQW 5499/09)

The Minister of the Environment: One of the objectives of the Water Framework Directive is to promote common approaches, standards and measures for water management across Member States. The implementation of the Directive therefore requires close co-operation and co-ordination between my officials and those in the Republic of Ireland, at both a policy and technical level, particularly in relation to the production of single plans for the International River Basin Districts, including the North Western and the Neagh Bann. At a policy level, co-ordination takes place through quarterly meetings of the North South Water Framework Directive Co-ordination Group. The North South Technical Advisory Group facilitates co-operation on technical and scientific aspects

The draft River Basin Management Plans, which are currently out for public consultation in both jurisdictions, contain a "Working Together" document which describes the continuing co-ordination which takes place.

Maze Site: Former Prison Buildings at

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment if he will rescind the listing order on the former prison buildings at the Maze. (AQW 5504/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The decisions to list and schedule structures at the Maze were taken only after a detailed examination and consideration of the architectural and historic significance of the site and buildings had been carried out.

The process of assessment for this site followed on from the assessment of Ebrington Barracks in Londonderry, a similar complex site, and follows best practice. A holistic assessment was made of the entire site before individual buildings of interest were identified and researched in more detail.

In the case of the Maze, the detailed research and overview was commissioned by the owners OFMDFM. The work was carried out by an English company – CgMs Consulting (who had also carried out an evaluation at Greenham Common). The then Environment and Heritage Service considered these views when making its recommendations to statutory consultees.

Listed buildings can be delisted if it can be shown that they do not meet the legislative test which requires them to be of ‘special architectural or historical interest’. This may be because some major change has occurred in the intervening years since the building was first listed or because a new historical fact has been unearthed, such as that the building is a complete rebuild and is therefore much younger than previously thought.

In the case of the Maze, following extensive research, a detailed consideration has concluded that the buildings listed meet the test of the legislation. However, following previous concerns on this issue, I have already asked the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to carry out a further review of the listing and potential for delisting on this site. I would expect that this will be carried out in due course.

Planning Policy Statement 8

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment if management companies that are not (i) a registered charitable trust; or (ii) supported by a charitable trust, satisfy the requirements of his Department’s Planning Policy Statement 8 Open Space, Sport and Outdoor. (AQW 5518/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A properly constituted residents’ association with an associated management company would be an acceptable arrangement under Policy OS 2 of Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation.

Reducing Packaging

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what he is doing to reduce the amount of packaging on products in stores and supermarkets. (AQW 5531/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department currently provides funding towards the work of WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme), a ‘not for profit’ company which seeks to achieve waste reductions and increased recycling. WRAP has entered into a voluntary agreement (“the Courtauld Commitment”) with the major UK grocery organisations, designed to reduce the amount of packaging and food waste that ends up in household bins. In 2008, this agreement led to zero growth in packaging, despite increases in sales and population.

The Courtauld Commitment also seeks to deliver absolute reductions in packaging waste by 2010, and a significant reduction in food waste. In order to achieve this, signatories to the Commitment are working in partnership with WRAP to develop innovative packaging solutions and technologies across the whole supply chain.

My officials are also currently participating in a UK-wide strategic review of packaging policy. One of the objectives of that review is to minimise the environmental impact of packaging, without compromising its ability to protect the product. We anticipate that the new strategy will encourage more prevention of excess packaging at source and increased re-use and recycling.

The NI Waste Management Strategy gives highest priority to waste prevention. My officials are working to develop a waste communications strategy to ensure effective delivery of key messages, including messages on avoidance of excess packaging. This is essential if we are to bring about the changes necessary to reduce waste and improve environmental quality.

I also propose to revise the “Wake up to Waste” website to deliver up to date and relevant information designed to encourage behavioural change. I anticipate that this will include direct messages to businesses on waste prevention and packaging reduction.

Disposal of Unlicensed Motor Vehicles

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment what was the total cost of the removal and disposal of unlicensed motor vehicles in each constituency, in the last year. (AQW 5575/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an excepted matter, which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport but it is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) under an agreement between my Department and the Department for Transport (DfT).

There is a UK-wide contract for a wide-range of activities relating to the detection, immobilisation and removal of unlicensed vehicles, which is awarded and administered by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea. I am informed that this contract does not feature a specific cost for the removal and disposal of these vehicles. The information requested is therefore not available.

Wildfowlers Association

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he will support the Wildfowlers Association and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation to retain the curlew on the quarry list. (AQW 5588/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The review of the Wildlife Order proposed removing the curlew from the quarry list, due to conservation concerns. This proposal resulted in relevant conservation and sporting interests looking at various options to maintain a sustainable Curlew population.

My officials are working in partnership with these bodies to determine positive conservation benefits. A final decision on the future status of the species has yet to be taken.

Lough Cowey Reservoir: Illegally Dumping

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4974/09, to detail the techniques employed to (i) establish the nature of waste; and (ii) test the waste, illegally dumped at Lough Cowey during 2008. (AQW 5650/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The material deposited at the Lough Cowey site was easily identifiable, from a visual inspection on site, as construction waste containing concrete waste, with some plastic. Being inert material that would not break down and leach into the surrounding soil and water, the material was taken as neither a serious nor an immediate threat to the environment. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency therefore deemed it unnecessary to perform any further tests on it.

Illegal Waste: Slattinagh, Garrison and Trillick

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment if the repatriation of illegal waste from sites at Slattinagh, Garrison and Trillick was discussed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council meetings; and to provide an update. (AQW 5667/09)

Minister of the Environment: At the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Plenary format on 23rd January 2009 Ministers noted the progress that is being made on the removal of illegally dumped waste. However repatriation of illegal waste from sites at Slattinagh, Garrison and Trillick was not specifically discussed.

Officials from my Department have been involved in discussions with counterparts from the Department for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government aimed at resolving the remaining issues surrounding the scope of the work, the methods to be employed and the apportionment of costs. I hope that the necessary agreement can be reached within the next month to allow the procurement process to commence which will lead to the award of a contract for the repatriation of the waste.

Bumble Bees: Reintroduction of

Mr Cree asked the Minister of the Environment what measures are being taken to reintroduce the rare bumblebee, *Bombus Distinguendus* to Northern Ireland. (AQW 5702/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no plans to re-introduce the great yellow bumble bee *Bombus distinguendus* to Northern Ireland. The species is currently listed as a Northern Ireland priority biodiversity species. However, there has been no confirmed sighting of the species in recent years despite intensive survey effort and it is now being considered for removal from this list.

Any reintroduction of the species would first require the restoration or creation of extensive areas of suitable flower-rich habitat. The designation and management of coastal grassland within Areas of Special Scientific Interest and lands under agri-environment schemes such as the Countryside Management Scheme will help restore areas which may become suitable for the species.

However, it is likely to be some time before suitable habitats become self sustaining and sufficiently widespread to allow for a viable population of the great yellow bumble bee to re-colonise or to be reintroduced.

High Hedges

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW4232/09, if because of public demand, he would consider expediting the legislation for high hedges prior to May 2011 and the new Council Structures under the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 5751/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am very much aware of the ongoing interest in this subject and the calls for new laws to be introduced in Northern Ireland to help people who are adversely affected by nuisance high hedges deal with the problem. However, my current position on this matter is determined by significant resource constraints, wider competing priorities and the impact on district councils of the Review of Public Administration. I am, therefore, unable to expedite this matter at this time.

High Hedges

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his Department's assessment of the nuisance hedge problem; (ii) to list all the actions required by his Department and the Assembly, to introduce legislation to deal with this issue; (iii) to detail the reasons why he does not intend to engage with Councils until after elections in May 2011; and (iv) whether he will review that position. (AQW 5783/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In August 2005 my Department published a consultation document and questionnaire seeking information on the scale and geographical spread of problems with nuisance high hedges in Northern Ireland. The consultation exercise confirmed that the high hedge problem in Northern Ireland is at least on a par with that in England and Wales and it was accepted that legislation was necessary to deal with the problem. This assessment of the nuisance high hedges problem has not changed.

Once a decision is taken to progress work on high hedges legislation the next stage would be to produce a detailed consultation document on the proposed details of the system of high hedge control to be enshrined in the legislation and a regulatory impact assessment. The consultation would inform the subsequent drafting of the legislation which would in due course, be laid before the Assembly and would be required to go through the various legislative stages in the Assembly.

It is likely, given the experiences of similar legislation elsewhere, that a substantial Bill would be required and detailed supporting subordinate legislation covering complaints/appeals mechanisms, together with a range of guidance documents would also be needed. All of this would be drawn up by the Department and be subject to the necessary consultation arrangements and Assembly processes.

Any new scheme provided for by the legislation to deal with the issue of high hedges will be operated by local government and I would not underestimate the amount of additional work such a scheme would have on district councils, particularly during the early stages of the scheme's operation when the existing problems affecting many householders would need to be dealt with. It is with this in mind, together with the competing priorities and resource constraints I am facing, that I have decided not to progress the development of policy and legislation on this matter until after the eleven new Councils have been elected in May 2011. This also allows me to focus Departmental staff resources on higher priority environmental issues over the coming years.

I regularly review my priorities with my officials, and whilst I am very much aware of the ongoing interest in this subject and the calls for new laws to be introduced in Northern Ireland to help people who are adversely

affected by nuisance high hedges deal with the problem, the circumstances I described above have not changed since I made my decision and I will only be revisiting the issue when the new Councils have been elected in 2011.

Divisional Planning Offices: Ards Borough Council

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications have been lodged with the Divisional Planning Office, Rathkeltair House by the Ards Borough Council in each month from September 2008. (AQW 5786/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office has received only one application from Ards Borough Council from September 2008 to date. This application was received in September 2008 and was for the conversion of a caretaker's cottage at Dunover Road, Ballywalter.

“Act on CO2” Television Advertisement

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment how much correspondence he has received in relation to his decision on the “Act on CO2” television advertisement and how many were in favour of the position he has adopted. (AQW 5794/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have received 354 pieces of correspondence in relation to the “Act on CO2” television advertisement. 80% of the correspondents were in favour of my position.

High Hedges

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment whether he intends to introduce legislation to deal with disputes over high hedges in residential areas. (AQW 5797/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As any scheme to deal with the issue of high hedges will be operated by local government I must be conscious of the impact on Councils of the Review of Public Administration and our intention to implement the agreed local government reorganisation package by 2011. I also have to be mindful of the competing priorities and resource constraints I am facing. In these circumstances, I intend to undertake the engagement process with the eleven new Councils once they have been elected in May 2011.

Illegal Fly Posting

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment what policies are available to local authorities to deal with illegal fly posting. (AQW 5798/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 gives district councils the power to issue a notice requiring the removal of any placard or poster which is displayed in contravention of any regulations made under Article 67 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

District Councils are of course also able to introduce initiatives in their respective areas to help to deal with local environmental problems, including illegal fly posting.

Illegal Fly Posting

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment what legal action has been taken on illegal fly posting in each of the District Council areas, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5799/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department does not hold information centrally about the extent of legal action taken on illegal fly posting in each of the District Council areas across Northern Ireland.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of civil service staff employed by his Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4905/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The number of civil service staff employed by my Department, broken down by (i) grade, (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers is provided in the attached tables.

DFP CORE

Grades (inc. analogous)	Position @1 May 2007	Position @ 1 January 2009
Senior Civil Service	39	39
Grade 6	45	53
Grade 7	165	168
Deputy Principal	277	303
Staff Officer	265	301
Executive Officer 1	221	251
Executive Officer 2	211	284
Administrative Officer	317	389
Administrative Assistant	197	141
Industrial	32	28
Total	1769	1957

DFP AGENCIES

Grades (inc. analogous)	Position @1 May 2007	Position @ 1 January 2009
Senior Civil Service	6	8
Grade 6	15	20
Grade 7	53	67
Deputy Principal	157	204
Staff Officer	194	235
Executive Officer 1	88	186
Executive Officer 2	139	174
Administrative Officer	437	499
Administrative Assistant	182	109
Total	1271	1502

Rates Assistance Package

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to breakdown the value of the £8m rates assistance package broken down by each of the local government districts. (AQW 5422/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The package of assistance will allow councils, where they are in a general repayment situation, to offset this amount through staging any repayments arising from reductions in

British Telecom (BT) and Ministry of Defence (MOD) valuations over five years, a benefit estimated to be worth up to £3.3m next year.

I will also provide for the removal of the 3% cost for councils attributable to housing benefit administration from 2008/09 and reduce the impact of the landlord allowance on councils, for NIHE properties, over 2008/09 and 2009/10, pending a review of the allowance prior to the introduction of the rating of empty homes. This change to the way councils' net revenues are calculated could provide a benefit of up to £4m next year. Finally, there will be a one off reduction in the cost of collection to ensure that some of the additional costs associated with the development of new IT systems are not passed on to councils. This will provide a one off benefit to councils of around £600,000.

The figures in relation to the BT and MOD repayments are indicative at this stage and represent the estimated maximum possible assistance that could be provided to councils next year. They are expected to fluctuate because the benefit of the MOD and BT offset is dependent on the extent that individual councils would otherwise have been required to repay. Furthermore, the position of individual councils at finalisation is particularly difficult to gauge during this period of unprecedented economic uncertainty. For these reasons is not possible to provide a precise breakdown of the assistance to each council at this stage. However, once there is greater certainty I will ensure that the information is provided.

Capital Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to his answer to AQW4873/09, to confirm that the capital expenditure will be £1.4bn by 31 March 2009. (AQW 5430/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The latest forecasts suggest that capital expenditure by Northern Ireland departments will be over £1.4 billion in 2008-09. Information regarding the actual level of capital expenditure by Northern Ireland departments in this financial year will not be available until June 2009, as part of Provisional Outturn.

ERINI Document

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel on what date did he and/or his officials receive the ERNI document dated Feb 2009 marked 'Draft Paper strictly embargoed until further notice'. (AQW 5471/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Neither I nor my officials have received an ERINI document which is dated Feb 2009 marked 'Draft Paper strictly embargoed until further notice'.

Derry/Londonderry: Civil Service Staff Travelling to and from Belfast for Work

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Civil Service employees who travel to work (i) from Londonderry/Derry to Belfast; and (ii) from Belfast to Londonderry/Derry, broken down by Government Department. (AQW 5555/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Based on information currently held the details are as follows:-

Staff with a home address of Belfast and who work in Londonderry by Department;

DETI	DSD	Total
1	4	5

Staff with a home address of Londonderry and who work in Belfast by Department;

DARD	DEL	DETI	DHSSPS	DRD	DSD	DE	DOE	DFP	OFMDFM	Total
7	13	1	7	14	79	12	16	38	4	191

It should be noted that home addresses are not held in respect of all staff. The records held also do not provide any details on (i) those staff who may use temporary accommodation or (ii) whether individuals travel on a daily basis.

Departmental and Agency Staff

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel the number of staff in each Government Department and Agency who are currently seeking transfers out of the Belfast area to the North West; and what is the average length of waiting time for a transfer to be granted. (AQW 5573/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Based on information currently held, staff working in the Belfast area with a transfer request for Londonderry, Limavady or Coleraine by Department/Agency is as follows:-

DARD	DEL	DCAL	DETI	DHSSPS	DRD	DSD (including SSA)	DE	DOE	DFP	NIO	OFMDFM	Total
16	32	3	6	10	26	207	2	54	67	10	6	439

Information in relation to the average length of waiting time for a transfer to be granted is not held.

Small Business Rates Relief Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much the proposed small business rates relief scheme will cost annually. (AQW 5689/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The estimated annual cost of the scheme is £7.9m, based on applying NAV limits which are equivalent to those that exist under the Welsh small business rate relief scheme.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Free Personal Care

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made preparing for the introduction of free personal care; and for his assessment of whether it will be implemented in 2010. (AQW 4135/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My officials conducted the cost update on free personal care which I promised in the Assembly debate on 29 May 2007. I have considered this issue very carefully against the competing priorities I face across the health service and have concluded that free personal care in residential and nursing homes is not affordable within the current CSR period. I will, however, keep the issue under review.

Medical Negligence Claims

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to break down by Health and Social Care Trusts, the cost of medical negligence claims, for the last financial year. (AQW 4341/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested has been set out in the table below.

Cost of Medical Negligence 2007/08		
HSC Trust	Settlement	Third Party Legal Costs
Northern	£1,120,481	£518,695
Western	£589,000	£577,000
South Eastern	£1,478,556	£592,988
Southern	£500	£352

Cost of Medical Negligence 2007/08		
HSC Trust	Settlement	Third Party Legal Costs
Belfast	£5,093,758	£1,328,282
NI Ambulance	£7,250	£2,144

The total cost of medical negligence claims in 2007/2008 was £11.3 million. This figure includes settlement costs and third party legal costs and it represents 0.38% of all the HSC Trusts' total operating costs for 2007/2008.

The Settlement figures in the table are payments made to Claimants by the Trusts. The Third Party Legal Cost figures are legal costs incurred by, or on behalf of, the Claimant which were reimbursed by the HSC Trusts.

Capital Infrastructure Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all capital infrastructure projects (i) under construction; (ii) in the procurement process; or (iii) to be advertised in this financial year, in the Strangford constituency and to detail the aggregated value of each. (AQW 4900/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been advised by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust that a programme of office refurbishment and windows replacement commenced at Scrabo Children's Unit on 1 February 2009, at a total cost of £350k. In addition some minor refurbishment work is ongoing at Portaferry Health Centre at a cost of £40k.

The Trust has also advised that there are no capital infrastructure projects currently in procurement or scheduled to be advertised in this financial year in the Strangford area.

Rapid-Response Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the (i) potential problems; and (ii) unions issues, following the introduction of Rapid Response Vehicles. (AQW 5218/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Rapid response vehicles (RRVs) were introduced by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) in 2003. Since then, no problems specifically relating to their introduction have been identified.

It is the responsibility of NIAS to deal with union issues regarding any service development. I have been advised that NIAS has been fully engaged with its recognised trade unions about the introduction of RRVs.

Epilepsy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance has been offered by experts from other countries to assist those with (i) epilepsy; and (ii) cerebral palsy. (AQW 5240/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Experts from other countries do not offer assistance to those suffering from epilepsy and cerebral palsy within Northern Ireland as a matter of course.

Referrals outside Northern Ireland are made on the basis of clinical need. Children with complex epilepsy may be referred to a specialist centre in the UK, usually Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) in London, which provides a supra-regional epilepsy service. Referral may be for assessment of the feasibility of epilepsy surgery, for diagnostic investigations, including EEG telemetry, which may not be available locally and to access further specialist opinion in cases of diagnostic uncertainty.

Children who are diagnosed with cerebral palsy are initially assessed by a paediatric-led multi-disciplinary team. Health and Social Care Trusts contract with a number of voluntary and independent organisations to provide a range of services for people with disabilities, including epilepsy and cerebral palsy. These organisations have expertise in working with people with physical and sensory disabilities.

Rathmoyle Home

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to where workers employed at Rathmoyle Home will be re-located; and how many will have to change the sector in which they work, under the proposed closure. (AQW 5244/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No decision has been taken on the future of Rathmoyle House as proposals from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust are still out for consultation. However, the NHSCT has advised that, should there be any changes following the consultation, those changes would be taken forward in line with the Trust's Human Resource Strategy and would include partnership approaches in consultation with staff and unions.

Rathmoyle Home

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety can he guarantee that (i) communal accommodation; (ii) individual units; and (iii) private home caring will be provided for elderly residents in Moyle, if Rathmoyle Home closes. (AQW 5245/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No decision on the future of Rathmoyle House has been taken. However, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) has advised that their ambition is to replace Rathmoyle with modern supported living accommodation and care and support services, and that those replacement services which the Trust would provide in the event of closure, will take account of the needs of existing and future residents.

Rathmoyle Home

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when a final decision will be made on the proposal to close Rathmoyle Home. (AQW 5246/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust's consultation will finish on 6th March. The Trust will then give consideration to all the views raised in the consultation before making a decision on the future of Rathmoyle and, if necessary refer the proposal to me for a final decision. Given that the consultation has not yet finished, it is not possible at this point to predict when a final decision will be taken.

Rathmoyle Home

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the proposal to close Rathmoyle will be rural-proofed. (AQW 5247/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No decision has been taken to close Rathmoyle. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust have advised that the proposal for Rathmoyle is about replacement of accommodation and extending the range of care and support options for older people into the future. The Trust proposes to replace the existing accommodation with modern accommodation on the same site if possible, and if not, in the same locality. The proposals take account of the location of all statutory homes in order that the programme of replacement would be carried out uniformly across the Trust's geographical area. As the proposal is one of replacement rather than closure, the Trust have advised that it was not considered necessary to rural-proof the proposals for Rathmoyle.

Rathmoyle Home

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide more detail than is in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's consultation document on the scoring mechanism used in the decision to propose closure of Rathmoyle Home. (AQW 5248/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social care trust has advised that the assessment criteria used to identify those statutory homes suitable for replacement was drawn up

by the Trust's Residential Homes Management Team (RHMT) led by the Assistant Director with responsibility for residential homes.

All of the Trust's statutory homes were assessed against the criteria set out in the Trust's consultation document, and scored accordingly by the RHMT. Of the two homes scored in the Coleraine/Ballymoney/Moyle area, Rathmoyle scored less favourably in terms of resident's privacy and flexibility for future development on the existing site given the prevalence of double rooms in Rathmoyle and limited physical space.

Departmental Spend

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his Department's spending per head of population, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 5255/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the amount planned to be spent per head of population based on local commissioning groups during the financial year 2008/09, after population figures have been adjusted for need.

Needs weighted populations are used in financial commissioning as they take into account age, gender and any additional health and social care requirements for populations.

	Spend per Head of Needs Weighted Population (£)
Belfast	1,610
North	1,500
South	1,450
South East	1,500
West	1,490

- Figures taken from Strategic Resources Framework 2008/09 and have been rounded to nearest £10

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department has details of which Health and Social Care Trusts are the most efficient. (AQW 5256/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The overall efficiency of each Trust is not possible to measure definitively, as Trusts engage in a widely varied range and mix of activities which cannot be fully compared on a consistent basis.

However I am of the view that all Trusts have the capacity to be more efficient and therefore they have all been required to contribute to the CSR efficiencies targets.

Inherited Legacy Debt

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of inherited legacy debt, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5257/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Upon the creation of the five new health and social care trusts on 1 April 2007, only one former trust, Sperrin Lakeland, incurred a revenue deficit of £3.36m in 2006/07. This will only need to be recovered in the event that the Western Trust fails to achieve financial break-even in 2008/09.

Ravara House, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why Ravara House, Bangor is not accepting new residents. (AQW 5258/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that, while it continues to offer permanent Elderly Mentally Infirm residential care places, no new permanent frail elderly placements have been made in statutory residential homes given decreasing demand and the Trust's focus on supporting people in their own homes. The Trust has focused resources on responding to demand for community based services such as intermediate, respite and domiciliary care in order to support carers and help people maintain their independence in their own homes.

Health Service Staff

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) surgeons; (ii) consultants; (iii) doctors; (iv) nurses; (v) middle managers; (vi) administrative staff there are in the Health Service. (AQW 5282/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of staff employed in the above selected grades within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF STAFF EMPLOYED WITHIN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE, BY SELECTED GROUP, AS AT 31ST DECEMBER 2008.

Grade	Staff Employed	
	Headcount	WTE1
Surgeons ²	400	367.2
Consultants ³	1,341	1,264.4
Doctors ⁴	3,705	3,461.0
Qualified Nursing Staff	16,346	13,963.2
Nurse Support Staff	4,663	3,990.5
Middle Managers ⁵	N/A	N/A
Administrative Staff	12,600	11,009.9

Source: Surgeons - NI Health & Social Care Trust
Other Staff Groups – Human Resource Management System

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
2. 'Surgeons' are included within both of the staff groups 'Consultants' and 'Doctors'. Surgeons has been defined as Medical and Dental Staff at Consultant, Staff Grade and Associate Specialist Grades who are linked to a service where surgical procedures are likely to be carried out, including General Surgery, ENT, Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Trauma & Orthopaedics, Urology, Orthodontics, Dentistry, Ophthalmic Surgery and Otolaryngology.
3. 'Consultants' include both Medical and Dental Consultants.
4. 'Doctors' include all grades of Medical Staff including Consultant, Staff Grade, Associate Specialist, General & Hospital Practitioners, Medical Officers and Medics at Training Grades.
5. Information on the number of Middle Managers is not available centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. Many middle managers will be subsumed within the Administration Staff grade but other professional staff, with middle level managerial responsibilities, will also be working across other staff groups.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many qualified dental technicians from the full-time course at the Royal Victoria Hospital School of Dentistry have been employed by the Health Service; and to estimate how many went on to work in the commercial sector, in the past 5 years. (AQW 5306/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: 19 dental technicians have qualified in the 5 year period from 2004. 12 are employed by private labs, 2 are employed at the School Dentistry, 2 have joined the British Army Dental Corp and 3 have continued into further education (BSc Dental Technology).

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department carries out a (i) skills assessment; and (ii) workforce review of dental technology. (AQW 5307/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of the cycle of workforce reviews, the dental care professionals workforce was reviewed in 2005 and this included dental technicians. These reviews include an examination of education and training issues. A further dental workforce review is planned for the 2009/10 financial year and will encompass dental technology. The recommendations of this review will inform future commissioning levels.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Minister intends to review dental technology since it is required by law for dental technicians to hold a recognised qualification. (AQW 5308/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A review of the dental workforce is scheduled for the 2009/10 financial year. This review will encompass dental technology.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is aware that the General Dental Council may allow individuals to register as a dental technician without a recognised qualification; and for his assessment as to whether this practice is acceptable. (AQW 5309/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The General Dental Council is a regulatory body and has the remit to decide how to administer registration. I am confident that patient protection is at the heart of the GDC decision.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consultation the General Dental Council had with his Department about dental care professionals registering with the General Dental Council; and for an estimate of the potential impact this may have on dental care jobs. (AQW 5310/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The GDC policy is to regulate and register all dental care professionals (DCPs) and a public consultation was carried out on the proposed changes. In addition, my Department, in conjunction with the GDC, organised a series of roadshows in Northern Ireland to consult with local DCPs. These events took place in March 2003 and March 2005 and very large numbers of DCPs attended these events. The Chief Dental Officer sits as an associate member of the GDC and was consulted on this issue throughout the period of the policy change.

Latest statistics from the GDC indicate a very high uptake of registration by dental care professionals in Northern Ireland which is encouraging and should ensure continuity of care for patients.

Independent Living

Mrs O'Neill asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people are using direct payments to pay for their care package; (ii) of those using direct payments how many are also in receipt of funding from the Independent Living (Extension) Fund and the Independent Living (1993) Fund; and (iii) how many direct payment users are in receipt of a care package of more than £325. (AQW 5332/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) 1,134 persons were using direct payments to pay for their care package at 31 December 2008;

- (ii) Information on those receiving funding from the Independent Living (Extension) Fund and the Independent Living (1993) Fund is not collected centrally by the DHSSPS. The Independent Living Fund is a non-Departmental body whose sponsor Department is the Department for Social Development; and,
- (iii) Information on the number of persons receiving a care package of more than £325 is not collected centrally, and if available, could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Residential Home Places

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) residential home places; and (ii) nursing care places are provided by (a) statutory providers; and (b) non statutory providers, in each District Council area. (AQW 5335/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table details information at 30 June 2008:

Local Government District	(i) Number of Residential Places Available*		(ii) Number of Available Nursing Care Beds*	
	(a) Statutory	(b) Independent	(a) Statutory	(b) Independent
Antrim	68	111	-	414
Ards	79	128	-	449
Armagh	-	224	-	403
Ballymena	38	130	-	349
Ballymoney	29	111	-	81
Banbridge	91	16	-	188
Belfast	328	786	10	1,537
Carrickfergus	86	45	-	228
Castlereagh	70	155	-	387
Coleraine	6	144	-	314
Cookstown	29	68	-	178
Craigavon	-	109	-	343
Derry	121	170	-	386
Down	118	320	-	441
Dungannon	36	49	-	449
Fermanagh	48	201	-	492
Larne	41	67	-	141
Limavady	32	17	-	149
Lisburn	143	86	-	668
Magherafelt	3	71	-	118
Moyle	39	42	-	84
Newry & Mourne	59	43	-	434
Newtownabbey	81	47	-	557
North Down	110	373	-	588
Omagh	43	122	-	223
Strabane	34	38	-	188
Northern Ireland	1,732	3,673	10	9,789

* Residential places in nursing homes have been included in part (i) and excluded from part (ii).

** There is no statutory provision in nursing homes. However, Forest Lodge in Musgrave Park Hospital, Belfast has 10 available nursing care beds.

Counselling: Funding

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to funding across Trusts for counselling by the community and voluntary sector (i) how much was allocated; (ii) what was the total amount in applications; and (iii) what was the shortfall amount. (AQW 5355/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The systems operating in the Trusts do not hold the information requested and it could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Counselling: Waiting Times

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a breakdown of the waiting times for counselling, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 5356/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Counselling: Waiting Times

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a breakdown of the waiting times on referrals to community and voluntary sector for counselling, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5357/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are enough fully qualified, technical dental staff to meet the demands of all Health Service patients. (AQW 5376/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department monitors the number of Dental Care professionals in the workforce as part of its workforce planning mechanism. Although the majority of dental technicians are employed by the private sector my Department commissions training for 5 dental technicians annually, to ensure a continuous supply of dental technicians for the hospital sector in NI. In addition, as dental technicians do not directly deliver service to patients, the function can be delivered from any part of the UK or further afield.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he would consider supporting the course devised by the Dental Laboratories Association for Northern Ireland and the Belfast Dental School to meet any skills gap. (AQW 5377/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The course recommended by the DLA does not lead to immediate GDC registration and therefore is not an appropriate course to support. As indicated in my response to AQ 3889/09 my Department cannot fund the commercial sector, however we do fund a full time course for 5 dental technicians and have made £120K per year available for CPD for dental care professionals, which include dental technicians.

Dental Technicians

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3889/09, to provide details about his Department's discussions with Department for Employment and Learning to facilitate part-time training for dental technicians. (AQW 5378/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has been engaged in discussions with local further education providers to look at options for providing part time training. Due to other business

priorities, discussions with the Department for Employment and Learning have yet to commence, however they will be initiated as soon as possible.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of his current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to his Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5402/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: While household costs have risen and job security has been threatened, to date, the economic downturn has had limited direct impact on the delivery of current policies. However, it is clear from the evidence that social, economic and environmental conditions play a major role in determining health. Those who are poorer or disadvantaged are more likely to face more illness during their lifetime and die younger than those who are better off. In Northern Ireland there are already stark inequalities in health for example between those living in the most deprived areas and Northern Ireland overall. Any long term increase in unemployment levels therefore has the potential to be detrimental to the mental health and wellbeing of an increased proportion of our population and I foresee an increased demand for intervention and support in this area.

My Department has taken a number of actions that have a real and immediate impact to the public and the wider Northern Ireland economy. From 1 January 2009 I have reduced the prescription charge per item to £3 and plan to abolish the charge entirely from 1 April 2009. Reducing these charges allows patients to access essential medication as they deal with the stress of life threatening illnesses, experience financial difficulties through the general rise in household costs or through being out of work.

In addition, in line with other government Departments, DHSSPS has committed to paying businesses within 10 days and guidance has been issued to all Health and Social Care bodies concerning the new commitment to paying businesses within 10 days subject of receipt of goods and or invoice. Furthermore, I am pressing ahead to ensure that almost £700m of capital funding is being invested during the CSR period to deliver first class facilities across the service.

Departmental Reports

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (a) reports; (b) strategy papers; (c) policy statements; and (d) consultation documents were produced in each of the last five years; and what was (i) the total cost; (ii) the number of copies; (iii) the cost of printing; and (iv) the cost of designing. (AQW 5424/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested.

Health Service: Spend on Flowers and Plants

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent by the Health Service on purchasing flowers and plants in each of the last five years. (AQW 5425/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Health Service: Spend on Artwork

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent by the Health Service on purchasing artwork, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5426/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not held centrally.

North/South Ministerial Council Meeting

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his reasons for not attending the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on the 23 January 2009, particularly given that issues such as suicide prevention and child protection were discussed. (AQW 5433/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I was unable to attend the NSMC Meeting in the Plenary Format on 23rd January. I note however that none of the items on the agenda for substantive discussion were within my specific remit. Suicide Prevention and Child Protection were to be included under the heading of a general progress report and I ensured that the First and deputy First Ministers were supplied with appropriate briefing on these topics, along with other health issues covered under the heading of the North West Gateway Initiative.

Sexual and Physical Abuse

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what (i) statutory and (ii) non statutory services are provided to children and young people who have suffered sexual and/or physical abuse, in each constituency. (AQW 5438/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the provision of statutory and non-statutory services to children who have suffered sexual and/or physical abuse is not held by constituency.

Health Service: Spend on Bottled Water

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent by the Health Service on purchasing bottled water, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5460/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Health Service: Capital Infrastructure Investment Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all capital infrastructure investment projects in the Health Service (i) for this year and (ii) planned for next year, and the value of the each investment. (AQW 5489/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My approved capital budgets for 2008/09 and 2009/10, including assumed income from asset sales, are £204m and £211m respectively. Within these amounts there are annual allocations for NIFRS, NIAS, ICT, Trust General Capital and UK-wide initiatives such as pandemic flu. In 2008/09 these allocations total approximately £70 million, which, when added to the projects detailed in the table below, show that the capital budget is fully committed in 2008/09.

Given that business cases for a number of planned schemes have not yet been approved, the table below includes only projects that are contractually committed in 2009/10.

Trust	Project	2008-09	2009-10
Belfast	Shankill Health & Well Being Centre	£1,019,000	£5,221,000
Belfast	Forest Lodge	£211,000	£0
Belfast	CONICAR at Iveagh	£858,000	£2,674,000
Belfast	Foster Green Regional Adolescent Psychiatric Unit	£3,018,000	£4,857,000
Belfast	Foster Green Regional Childrens Psychiatric Unit	£1,115,000	£5,049,000
Belfast	Enler	£988,000	£1,012,000
Belfast	Royal - Victoria Pharmaceuticals	£4,113,000	£3,464,000
Belfast	RVH Energy Centre	£1,000,000	£270,000
Belfast	Royal - Maternity Interim Scheme (MES)	£2,400,000	£476,190

Trust	Project	2008-09	2009-10
Belfast	Beechall Health & Care Centre	£1,348,000	£5,030,000
Belfast	Musgrave Park Neurology Ward	£500,000	£1,450,000
Belfast	QUB Medical School	£2,600,000	£388,143
Belfast	Mater Fairview Extension	£27,000	£0
Belfast	RVH -Critical Care Block	£15,100,000	£24,930,000
Belfast	Posijet	£0	£118,000
Belfast	RVH - Phase 2 IT	£500,000	£1,000,000
Belfast	Grove Health and Wellbeing Centre	£721,000	£0
Belfast	Lucentis Ophthalmology	£33,000	£442,000
Belfast	Castlereagh CTCC	£3,305,000	£142,857
Belfast	Muckamore Abbey Phase 1	£0	£200,000
Belfast	Muckamore Abbey Phase 2	£810,000	£470,000
Belfast	Muckamore Abbey Phase 3	£2,140,000	£60,000
Belfast	Muckamore Abbey Phase 4	£470,000	£1,150,000
Belfast	Somerton Road Children's Home	£15,000	£0
Northern	Inver House	£53,000	£0
Northern	Data Comms	£250,000	£0
Northern	Day Procedures/ Risk Assessment Unit	£10,000	£0
Northern	Carnview Children's Home	£866,000	£100,000
South Eastern	Lisburn Assesment and Resource Centre	£1,500,000	£1,500,000
South Eastern	Downe Hospital ICT Infrastructure	£1,741,287	£658,557
South Eastern	Ulster Hospital Phase A & Care of the Elderly	£18,814,000	£21,310,000
South Eastern	Downe Hospital Main Development	£23,886,000	£5,270,000
South Eastern	Bangor & Ards ISUs	£1,179,000	£22,000
South Eastern	Bayview	£1,106,000	£56,190
South Eastern	Specialist Breast & Endocrine Outpatient Unit - UCH	£425,000	£425,000
South Eastern	Downpatrick Children's Home	£15,000	£0
South Eastern	Urology	£42,000	£0
Southern	Newry SEC	£600,000	£2,188,000
Southern	Newry Childrens Home	£600,000	£1,660,000
Southern	Decontamination /scopes	£834,000	£0
Southern	Theatre 5 Replacement	£1,901,000	£60,000
Southern	Daisy Hill Car Park	£220,000	£0
Southern	Car Park at CAH	£400,000	£0
Southern	Catheterisation Laboratory	£62,000	£0
Southern	T&O Facility - Phases A&B	£2,682,000	£7,902,000
Southern	Portadown Health & Care Centre	£5,062,000	£10,159,000
Southern	Crisis Resource Centre (Blue Stone Centre)	£1,003,000	£0
Southern	Daisy Hill Renal	£1,210,000	£38,095

Trust	Project	2008-09	2009-10
Southern	Learning Disability Respite Unit Dungannon	£150,000	£0
Western	Gransha Mental Health Crisis Centre	£590,000	£221,905
Western	Omagh Centre	£356,000	£0
Western	Omagh Local Hospital Enabling Works	£3,900,000	£3,462,000
Western	Omagh Local Hospital – Programme Management & Design	£1,201,000	£1,402,000
Western	PCCI Programme Management Costs	£150,000	£0
Western	SW Hospital, Enabling Works	£1,644,000	£0
Western	SW Hospital Programme Management & Design	£1,750,000	£1,288,000
Western	Altnagelvin Phase 3.2A South Block	£11,370,000	£897,000
Western	Altnagelvin Phase 3.2B South Block Phase 2	£4,191,000	£8,377,000
Western	Hine Review Decontamination	£581,000	£0
NIFRS	Central Energy	£26,000	£0
NIAS	Ministerial Commitment - 2 Ambulances for Western Trust	£220,000	£0
Belfast	Central Energy	£0	£0
Northern	Central Energy	£32,000	£0
South Eastern	Central Energy	£211,000	£0
Southern	Central Energy	£474,000	£0
GALA	Case Management Solution	£30,000	£30,000
CSA	Server hardware replacement	£15,000	£0
NISCC	Telecoms system	£20,000	£0
NIBTSA	Storage Facility Extension	£185,000	£0
	Totals	£133,848,287	£125,430,938

Liver Transplants

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people received liver transplants in each of the last five years, and how many of these people needed transplants because of alcohol abuse problems. (AQW 5494/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Between 2004 and 2008, 3253 people in the UK received liver transplants, 97 from Northern Ireland. Of these people 17.7% had a primary diagnosis of alcoholic liver disease.

Whether an individual patient with a history of alcohol abuse is likely to benefit fully from a transplant is a matter of clinical judgement.

Epilepsy

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were diagnosed with epilepsy, and subsequently had the diagnosis withdrawn, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5542/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people who were diagnosed with epilepsy, and subsequently had the diagnosis withdrawn is not available.

Procedure for Registering as Partially Sighted

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline correct procedure for registering as partially sighted. (AQW 5607/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following the patient's assessment, the Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI - NI 2005) may be completed by a Consultant Ophthalmologist to certify that the patient is eligible to be registered as sight impaired / partially sighted, or as severely sight impaired / blind under the provisions of the Supplementary Benefits (Requirements) Regulations (NI) 1983.

Subsequently, the patient's local Health and Social Services Trust will arrange, with the explicit consent of the patient, for his or her name to be added to the appropriate register. Registration is completely voluntary, and patients can choose to have their name removed at any time. If required, the Trust will also carry out an assessment of the patient's needs, and provide information about the services and benefits available.

Enniskillen Hospital

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the number of nursing staff in Enniskillen Hospital who have been issued redundancy notices since January 2009. (AQW 5662/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No redundancy notices have been issued to nursing staff in Enniskillen Hospital since January 2009.

Erne Hospital

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the reasons for the delay in recruiting a replacement for Doctor Holmes at the Erne Hospital so that the Pain Clinic can recommence; and to provide a date for the Pain Clinic to recommence. (AQW 5665/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am advised by the Trust that the recruitment of a Pain Consultant is proving difficult due to the lack of availability of suitably qualified specialists.

The Trust will continue to maintain a pain service by providing extra clinics at the Tyrone County Hospital.

Emergency Nurse Practitioners

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses in the Altnagelvin Hospital; (i) applied to the Emergency Nurse Practitioners post graduate course, and (ii) were prohibited from taking their EMP post graduate course, by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the past five years. (AQW 5674/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information obtained from the Western Trust has identified the following for the years available. No nurses who had requested places on the ENP course were prohibited from undertaking the course.

Year	Applications received	Applications supported
07/08	1	1
08/09	1	1

Emergency Nurse Practitioners

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses in Tyrone County Hospital; (i) applied to the Emergency Nurse Practitioners post graduate course, and (ii) were prohibited from taking their EMP post graduate course, by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the past five years. (AQW 5675/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information obtained from the Western Trust has identified the following for the years available. No nurses who had requested places on the ENP course were prohibited from undertaking the course. It is of note that one candidate from Tyrone County hospital had requested a different course in 07/08 year and subsequently asked to transfer on to the ENP course at a late stage. The University of Ulster were unable to process the late application to the course and this candidate was deferred until 08/09 intake.

Year	Applications received	Applications supported
07/08	0	0
08/09	1	1

Emergency Nurse Practitioners

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses in Erne Hospital; (i) applied to the Emergency Nurse Practitioners post graduate course, and (ii) were prohibited from taking their EMP post graduate course, by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the past five years. (AQW 5676/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information obtained from the Western Trust has identified the following for the years available. No nurses who had requested places on the ENP course were prohibited from undertaking the course.

Year	Applications received	Applications supported
07/08	0	0
08/09	2	2

Children Missing from Residential or Foster Care

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to recording children who go missing from residential or foster care, to detail (i) the process; (ii) the date on which the process came into effect; (iii) how many residential care homes have used it; and (iv) how many incidents of missing children have been recorded. (AQW 5715/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the Children's Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 that came into operation on the 1 April 2005 all Trusts have a statutory duty to draw up and record in writing procedures to be followed when any child accommodated in a children's home is absent without permission. These procedures have to be drawn to the attention of children and staff in the children's home.

Under the Foster Placement (Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 which came into operation on 4 November 1996 all Trusts are required to keep in their records of the placement any notifications by the foster carer of any serious occurrence affecting a child which includes absence without permission.

The information for part (iii) and (iv) is not collected centrally, and if available, could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at the Tyrone County Hospital is to remain as a permanent 24 hour, seven days a week, service. (AQW 5726/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital will continue to function as a 24 hour, seven days a week service.

The Trust advises that projected demand for the service indicates that 6 emergency nurse practitioners, supported by staff nurses and nursing auxiliaries, will be required to provide a doctor led 24/7 service at the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the Tyrone County Hospital deals with patients who require a scan after 5pm. (AQW 5727/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the new model of care, only those patients who are medically stable will be treated at Tyrone County Hospital. Such patients will not require access to out-of-hours CT scanning.

Where patients are assessed as not requiring acute medical treatment, but where CT scanning would contribute to their diagnosis, they will be given an appointment during normal working hours.

The Trust plans to increase the provision of diagnostics at TCH, including CT scanning, with the additional service provided by appointment during the normal working day. It would not be the best use of resources to provide a CT scanning service after 5 pm when there would be no demand, given the new model of care.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment as to whether a reduction in CT scanning services at the Tyrone County Hospital from 24 hours to 9am-5pm is the most efficient means of delivery of the service. (AQW 5728/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the new model of care, only those patients who are medically stable will be treated at Tyrone County Hospital. Such patients will not require access to out-of-hours CT scanning.

Where patients are assessed as not requiring acute medical treatment, but where CT scanning would contribute to their diagnosis, they will be given an appointment during normal working hours.

The Trust plans to increase the provision of diagnostics at TCH, including CT scanning, with the additional service provided by appointment during the normal working day. It would not be the best use of resources to provide a CT scanning service after 5 pm when there would be no demand, given the new model of care.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many emergency nurse practitioners are required to run the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre safely at the Tyrone County Hospital on a 24/7 basis. (AQW 5729/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital will continue to function as a 24 hour, seven days a week service.

The Trust advises that projected demand for the service indicates that 6 emergency nurse practitioners, supported by staff nurses and nursing auxiliaries, will be required to provide a doctor led 24/7 service at the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to planning application Z/2008/0306/F to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport, whether there has been correspondence between Planning Service and the Eastern Health and Social Services Board asking the Board to comment on the application, and if so, when. (AQW 5782/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Eastern Health and Social Services Board were invited to comment on the planning application for the proposed runway extension at George Best Belfast City Airport in a letter from Planning Service dated 2 February 2009.

This invitation arose following correspondence from the Board to the Planning Service in January 2009 which highlighted that the Board had not received any information or correspondence in relation to this application. The Board, as the responsible Health Authority for the area, expects to be consulted, particularly as this is a major application which prompts serious questions in regard to public health and public safety.

Carers' Review

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4687/09, if he will be more specific than 'in the near future'. (AQW 5835/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked for a report on the joint review to be provided before Easter.

Mental-Health Provision

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to increase resources for mental health provision in the next financial year. (AQO 2191/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Resources for mental health provision in 2009/2010 will increase by £14.6m. Over the CSR period investment in Mental Health Services will increase by £54.4m (£27m recurrently). This means by 2010/11, expenditure on mental health will have risen by 12%.

This funding, which is part of the extra money I fought hard to secure during the Budget negotiations, is further evidence of my commitment to improving services in this area.

Capital Budget Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an assessment of his capital budget programme. (AQO 2192/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The outcome of the CSR for my Department will allow me to progress a number of important capital projects but there are many more much-needed projects which, due to lack of funding, cannot proceed right across primary & community care, hospitals and emergency services.

Despite these constraints, I am pressing ahead to ensure that almost £700m of capital funding is being invested during the CSR to deliver first class facilities across the service, such as:

- Completion of a new state of the art £64m Enhanced Local Hospital in Downpatrick;
- Completion of the £100m first phase of the Ulster Hospital;
- Completion of a new £14m Regional Adolescent Psychiatric Unit and Family Centre at Forster Green;
- Completion of Health and Care Centres at Castlereagh, Shankill, Beechall and Portadown;
- Continuing the £143m development of the new Critical Care Building at the Royal Victoria Hospital

Loch Cuan Residential Home

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will make a decision on Loch Cuan Residential Home and what progress has been made on the consultation with residents and their families. (AQO 2193/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Trust's consultation period ended on 12th February, and the Trust is currently giving consideration to all the views raised in the consultation including, of course, those raised by residents and their families. It is important that the Trust is given sufficient time to give these views the consideration they deserve before reaching its decision. If it wishes to proceed with

closure, the final decision will be mine. However, we are still some way off that point and it is not therefore possible at this stage to say when, or if, I will have to make a final decision on the future of Loch Cuan.

Palliative/Hospice Care for Children

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what representations he has received on the funding of children's palliative care and children's hospice care. (AQO 2194/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am fully committed to ensuring that the full range of services are available to children with palliative care needs and I have received a number of representations on this issue.

I recently announced additional funding to improve community support for children with complex needs. This includes £2.4m for respite care, including hospice provision, and an increase of 30 nurses in the community children's nursing service which provides the bulk of palliative care for children.

In addition, from April 2008, the Children's Hospice has received an annual allocation of £200k to develop outreach services. Parents, families, and voluntary sector organisations such as MacMillan, Clic Sargent and the NI Children's Cancer Fund all work together with the statutory sector to provide support and care for children with life-limiting illnesses. Palliative care provided in the home can often be the most appropriate response in meeting the needs of these children.

I believe that this collaborative approach, which ensures that children and their families receive high quality care in the setting most appropriate to their individual needs, should continue.

Efficiency Savings

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the efficiency savings proposals for Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQO 2195/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Targets were imposed on all Departments at the same rate and there was no special dispensation made for health - despite inherent underfunding of £600m. The efficiencies are a major challenge for me but must be achieved if I am to deliver my service development and maintain services.

I am still waiting for consultation and internal Trust processes to complete before I can comment on the key proposals.

NIO Meetings

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any recent meetings he has held with the NIO and what issues were addressed at these meetings. (AQO 2196/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am in regular contact with the NIO on various issues of common interest, including the Fire and Rescue Service; emergency planning arrangements; sexual violence; prison health; child protection; domestic violence; firework safety; Coroners; and the protection of healthcare workers.

Births by Caesarean Section

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to reduce the number of births by caesarean section. (AQO 2198/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision to deliver a woman by Caesarean Section either electively or as an emergency is based on the clinical judgement of an obstetrician who takes account of the medical condition and circumstances of both mother and infant.

My Department has undertaken several initiatives to ensure all caesarean sections are carried out appropriately. Specifically I have asked Trusts to: implement recommendations from the Confidential Enquiry into Maternal

and Child Health report “Saving Mothers Lives”, and those recommendations arising from reviews of maternal deaths. During 2008 my Department also endorsed NICE guidance in relation to both Antenatal and Intrapartum care.

Health Outcomes: Reducing Inequalities

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in reducing inequalities in health outcomes, particularly in relation to Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 2199/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is increasingly recognised that health inequalities are the product of a wide range of social, economic and health related issues.

Although there have been some relative and welcome improvements across a number of indicators (for example, teenage births, infant mortality, admission rates to hospital, cancer incidence and death rates), in many areas the health inequality gaps remain large. In general terms the gap between deprived areas and the NI average has remained fairly consistent over recent years.

A sub-regional analysis at Trust area level is underway and should be published at the end of the year.

Further work to tackle the issue of Health Inequalities will be a key priority for the new Public Health Agency which will be launched on 1st April 2009.

Service Developments

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what new service developments he has announced since May 2007. (AQO 2200/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have announced the following service developments since May 2007:

- Exclusion of cleaning services from the scope of PFI project procurements in health and social care services;
- Car parking guidance for Trusts;
- Policy on Recruitment of doctors in training;
- Oral Health Strategy for NI;
- Local Decontamination Policy for General Practice Dentists;
- School Dental Screening;
- Student Nursing Bursaries;
- Nursing care standards for patient food in hospitals;
- Clinical supervision of nurses;
- Nursing response to children with complex physical healthcare needs;
- Improving cleanliness in hospitals and reducing healthcare acquired infections, including specific hand hygiene, hospital visiting and regional dress strategies;
- Improved workforce productivity;
- Equality, Good Relations and human rights strategy and action plan;
- The future of Pathology Services in NI;
- Transport Strategy for Health & Social Care Services in NI;
- Single Rooms Policy;
- Improving Stroke services in NI and investment of £14m;
- Immunisation against papilloma virus which causes cervical cancer;
- Introduction of bowel cancer screening;
- Introduction of screening for abdominal aortic aneurysm;
- Screening of newborns for Medium Chain Acetyl Co A Dehydrogenase Deficiency;
- Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups;
- Families Matter – supporting families in NI;

- Sexual Violence;
- Care Standards for Nursing & Residential Care homes;
- Review of Public Administration – Reform of Health & Social Care Services;
- New hospital for South West to be built near Enniskillen;
- Enhanced local hospital to be built at Omagh;
- Zero Tolerance to attacks on Health & Social Care staff;
- Nurses pay;
- Junior Doctors Recruitment;
- Recruitment of learning disability nurses;
- Suicide Prevention – introduction of help line;
- Cardiovascular Framework and investment of £12m;
- All Island Mental Health Promotion;
- Dental Contract;
- Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service;
- Diabetic Retinopathy Screening;
- Tobacco: Age of Sale;
- Regional drugs manufacturing facility;
- Investment of £3.4m in learning disability services;
- Tool for assessing the health and social care needs of older people;
- Investment of £9m to improve community support for children with complex needs;
- Code of Practice to protect service user confidentiality;
- Investment in Paediatric Neurology Services;
- Guidance on risk assessment and management in adult mental health services;
- Regional Parenting Helpline;
- Investment of £5m to improve services for respiratory disease;
- Top up option for additional drugs;
- Abolition of prescription charges;
- Introduction of community first responder schemes;
- Community pharmacy minor ailment service;
- Investment of approx £63m over three years to improve health and social care services and facilities in the Southern Trust area;
- Investment of £58m over three years to improve health and social care services and facilities in the Western Trust area;
- Establishment of personality disorder services;
- Investment of approx £117m over three years to improve health and social care services and facilities in the South Eastern Trust area;
- Revised Northern Ireland Pandemic Flu health plan;
- Investment of approx £29m over three years to improve health and social care services and facilities in the Northern Trust area;
- Investment of approx £180m over three years to improve health and social care services and facilities in the Belfast Trust area;
- Standards to improve patient care;
- Regional Action Plan to tackle ‘Hidden Harm’;
- Investment of £55m over three years for additional information technology across health and social care;
- Investment of £800,000 in publicly funded fertility services;
- Introduction of online infection control manual;
- Investment of approx £26m over three years in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service;

- Investment of £17m over the next three years in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service;
- Investment of £500,000 in the maternity unit at Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry;
- 24/7 nursing cover for Rathlin Island;
- Investment of over £3m in emergency services in Fermanagh and Tyrone;
- Investment of £190m at the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald; and
- Five Year Regional Strategy for tackling sexual violence and abuse.

Letters to Local Newspapers

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the letters he has submitted to the editorial pages of local weekly newspapers in his capacity as Minister in 2009. (AQO 2201/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have submitted four letters to the editorial pages of a range of local weekly papers.

Tobacco Control

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of his plans for future tobacco control. (AQO 2202/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I believe that my plans for tobacco control, which include banning the display of tobacco products at point of sale and introducing controls on the sale of tobacco from vending machines, will prove effective in helping to reduce the appeal and uptake of smoking by our children and young people.

In addition, my Department's Tobacco Action Plan 2003-2008 is being reviewed and will be updated to reflect current and emerging priorities. The use of public information campaigns and the further development of smoking cessation services are also key to achieving our long term goal of a tobacco free society.

Cardiac Deaths in Young People

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the increasing number of sudden cardiac deaths in young people. (AQO 2203/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of any increase in the number of sudden cardiac deaths in young people in Northern Ireland. Reliable figures on sudden cardiac death are difficult to quantify.

More than twenty different conditions have been identified as causes of sudden cardiac death in young people. There is no one specific test which can identify all those at risk of the different causes of sudden cardiac death and multiple cardiac investigations are often required to establish accurate diagnosis. Based on estimates from other countries, there are probably about ten sudden unexpected cardiac deaths from a range of different causes in young people in Northern Ireland every year.

A national UK Cardiac Pathology Network (UKCPN) was launched in November 2008. It has established a database which aims to provide improved data on the frequency of sudden cardiac death as well as important demographic information. The database will also provide information on geographic variation in the uptake of specialist cardiac pathology services.

Cocaine: Dangers

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to raise awareness of the dangers of cocaine given the increase in its availability. (AQO 2204/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Cocaine use is an issue my Department takes very seriously. Through the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs, relevant literature and education/information programmes currently available to young people, young adults, parents and professionals at both the

regional and local level contains information on cocaine, particularly highlighting the risks associated with its use. In addition, schools address cocaine use as part of the substance misuse programme of their preparing for life education courses.

My Department has recently commissioned two research projects looking at cocaine use and users, in terms of prevalence and attitudes. Once finalised these projects will inform decisions in relation to the need for a targeted regional cocaine public information campaign, and how this should be developed.

Pregnancy: Termination Guidelines

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what new recommendations he will make in his guidelines on the termination of pregnancy. (AQO 2205/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy has been produced to explain the existing law relating to the termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland, and explains how it relates to clinical practice. It does not make any new recommendations.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development how many pipe blockages cleared by Northern Ireland Water were attributed to inappropriate disposal of cooking fat, in each of the past five years. (AQW 4066/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that in many cases the equipment used to break up material or vacuum tanks used to clear the sewer make it difficult to identify the material that had caused a sewer blockage. For this reason, records of the specific causes of blockages are not maintained and NIW is unable to provide the breakdown sought.

Road Safety at Lislagan Primary School

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service will consider improving road safety at Lislagan Primary School in Ballymoney, and working with other agencies to improve parking facilities for parents. (AQW 4953/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a meeting took place recently, at Lislagan Primary School, to discuss road safety concerns. The meeting was attended by councillors, parents, the principal, the PSNI and Roads Service Officials.

One of the road safety issues identified, related to cars parking near the junction of Lislagan Road and Finvoy Road, and the congestion this practice sometimes causes. This in turn, creates difficulties for vehicles turning into Lislagan Road from the Finvoy Road. I understand that, in order to help relieve the congestion, Roads Service has now provided road markings to prohibit parking at this location.

With regard to improving parking facilities for parents at the school, the provision of additional parking at the school is a matter for the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) to take the lead on. Roads Service will continue to work with other agencies, including the NEELB, to address road safety issues that fall within its responsibility.

Translink: Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development how many instances of bullying on Translink buses in the Ballymena area have been reported to Translink, in each of the past four years. (AQW 5152/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has confirmed that, within the area served by the Ballymena bus depot, the following instances of bullying have been reported:-

2005	2006	2007	2008
1 complaint	1 complaint	2 complaints	3 complaints

Roads Maintenance: Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council Areas

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development in relation to roads maintenance in the Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council areas (i) how much his Department has spent in each of the last three years; and (ii) how many miles of road, by class, are in the constituencies. (AQW 5220/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service approximate spend on roads maintenance, in the Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council areas in each of the last three years, are set out in the table below.

	2007/08 £M	2006/07 £M	2005/06 £M
Craigavon Borough Council	5.5	5.2	5.3
Banbridge District Council	4.0	3.9	4.0

Details of road mileage, by class, in the Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council areas are set out in the table below.

	Motorway km	A Class km	B Class km	C Class km	Unclassified km
Craigavon Borough Council	23	61	101	135	504
Banbridge District Council	-	77	96	228	621

Rathgael Road, Bangor: Designation

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on the designation of the Rathgael Road in Bangor. (AQW 5294/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that the C368 Rathgael Road in Bangor, is classed as a C class road and under the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, is designated as a local distributor road.

Rathgael Road, Bangor: Improvements

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the (i) nature; and (ii) financial value of each improvement made by the Roads Service to the Rathgael Road in Bangor, over the last ten years. (AQW 5295/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Departments Roads Service has carried out a number of improvements to the Rathgael Road, Bangor over the last ten years. The table below sets out the nature of the works and the approximate value of each.

Date	Nature of the works	Cost (approx)
2000/01	Rathgael Road near Ferngrove - provision of hard standing area at bus stop.	£600
2001/02	Rathgael Road (at Nos. 158 – 160) – provision of footway link.	£11,000
2002/03	Rathgael Road / Clandeboye Road junction – signalisation and junction improvement, incorporating right-turn facilities and controlled pedestrian phases.	£85,000

Date	Nature of the works	Cost (approx)
2002/03	Rathgael Road – exiting 6 metre street lighting columns upgraded to 8 metre columns, with higher wattage lamps and improved lighting output.	£70,000
2003/04	Rathgael Road / Lord Wardens Road junction – provision of right turn pocket and pedestrian island.	£106,000
2004/05	Rathgael Road between Birch Drive and Clandeboye Road - minor improvements to kerb alignment.	£1,000
2005/06	Rathgael Road (EuroSpar to Lord Wardens Grange) – localised vertical realignment and construction of 28m of new footway.	£20,000
2006/07	Rathgael Road at Lord Wardens Road - alteration to kerb alignment at junction.	£4,000
Total		£297,600

In addition, I am advised that a number of carriageway and footway resurfacing schemes have been carried out on the Rathgael Road at a total estimated cost of £210k. These include:-

- 1998/99 – A2 Belfast Road to Clandeboye Road – carriageway resurfacing;
- 2001/02 – The Brambles to Henalta Wood – carriageway & footway resurfacing;
- 2002/03 – Rathgael Road / Clandeboye Road Junction – carriageway resurfacing;
- 2002/03 – Henalta Wood to Brook Lane – carriageway & footway resurfacing; and
- 2005/06 – Clandeboye Road to The Brambles – carriageway & footway resurfacing.

Rathgael Road, Bangor: Proposed Residential Development

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on the views of the Roads Service about the proposed residential development on the former NIO lands on the Rathgael Road in Bangor. (AQW 5296/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, as part of the planning process, it is currently considering an application for increased residential development on the former site of the Juvenile Correction Centre on the Rathgael Road, Bangor. The application also includes retail units.

Roads Service has raised a number of concerns in relation to the transportation impact of the development and is currently awaiting additional supporting information from the applicant.

Car Owners

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the legal position of car owners who want to park outside their own homes when it is adjacent to a marked bicycle lane. (AQW 5298/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are two types of cycle lane, a mandatory (marked by a solid white line) and advisory (marked by a broken white line) cycle lane. Subject to certain exceptions, it is an offence for a person to cause or permit any vehicle, other than a cycle, to wait in a mandatory cycle lane. The exceptions include:-

- vehicles being used in the services of the Department in pursuance of statutory powers or duties;
- vehicles being used in connection with any telegraphic line, or with the supply of electricity or gas, within the cycle lane or an area accessible only from the cycle lane;
- vehicles being used in an emergency by a medical practitioner, or for police, military, fire brigade or ambulance purposes; and
- vehicles waiting at the direction of, or with the permission of a police officer.

In the case of an advisory cycle lane, vehicles may park, unless waiting restrictions apply to that side of the road. However, I would encourage motorists not to park in an advisory cycle lane unless it is unavoidable.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken to deal with the problem that some domestic customers have with water pressure. (AQW 5339/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it aims to supply water to domestic customers at a pressure of at least 15 metres head at the boundary of their property. This is the recognised water industry minimum standard. If a domestic customer believes the water pressure serving his/her property is too low, NIW will carry out an investigation, free of charge, and inform the customer of the outcome and what solutions may be possible.

Water Supplies

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what notice is given to domestic customers who have their water supply cut off as a result of work being carried out. (AQW 5342/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that, in accordance with its Customer Charter, it aims to give domestic customers at least 48 hours notice in writing of plans to turn off or limit their water supply for more than 4 hours.

Obviously advance notice cannot be given if the water supply is disrupted by an unexpected event such as a burst water main. In such circumstances the priority is to restore the water supply as quickly as possible and NIW aims to achieve this within 12 hours of being notified of the problem. Where practicable, NIW will inform the residents affected of the work being carried out and the reason it is required.

NIW's Customer Charter can be accessed on its website at: <http://www.niwater.com/codesofpractice.asp>

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the monitoring his Department carries out on the efficiency of Northern Ireland Water's maintenance work. (AQW 5343/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Water's (NIW) overall performance is monitored through Key Performance Indicators (KPI'S) set out in its Strategic Business Plan. This includes targets on overall efficiency, interruptions to supply and water mains leakage. My Department monitors NIW's performance on these targets through quarterly meetings with the Company. There is no specific KPI relating to the efficiency of maintenance work.

NIW, like other utilities, has a statutory right to excavate roads and footpaths for the installation and maintenance of their equipment. Under the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, Roads Service regulates utility reinstatements to ensure they meet statutory quality requirements.

The Drinking Water Inspectorate and the Environment Agency monitor the quality of drinking water and wastewater discharges. Both bodies produce annual reports. Inefficient maintenance work would have an indirect impact on these areas.

The Utility Regulator monitors NIW's performance against its business plan objectives through the review of an Annual Information Return from the Company. The results of the Utility Regulator's analysis are published annually in a Cost and Performance Report.

Sewerage System in Killyleagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1280/09, why (i) an investigation of; and (ii) work on, the sewerage system in Killyleagh has not been fulfilled. (AQW 5346/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the sewerage network in Killyleagh is one of a programme of 14 where initial scoping studies will determine whether a full scale Drainage Area Study is carried out. This scoping study work is expected to be completed by the end of March 2009. If a full Drainage Area Study is required any further capital improvement work identified would be scheduled for commencement thereafter subject to availability of funding.

Tullynagardy Road, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to have the (i) pot holes filled; and (ii) resurfacing completed on the Tullynagardy Road in Newtownards. (AQW 5348/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that repairs have recently been carried out on the Tullynagardy Road, Newtownards, following the identification of a small number of potholes during a recent inspection of road.

You will appreciate that the funding available to Roads Service for structural maintenance is limited and consequently the resources available for such works are allocated, to the four Roads Service Divisions, on a needs-based priority approach. Unfortunately, there are no plans, at present, to carry out major resurfacing of the Tullynagardy Road.

However, I can advise that surfacing will be laid on sections of the verge, to enable vehicles to pass on this narrow road.

Ballycastle to Rathlin Ferry

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development what time the last ferry sailed from Ballycastle to Rathlin on Mondays and Fridays in (i) September; (ii) October; and (iii) November, in 2007 and 2008. (AQW 5364/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The last scheduled ferry sailing on Mondays and Fridays from Ballycastle to Rathlin was at 18.30 hours during September 2008 and at 16.30 hours during October and November 2008. The corresponding sailings in 2007 were at 18.30 hours during September and at 16.00 hours on Mondays and 16.30 hours on Fridays during October and November.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria is used to ascertain if school bus runs are gritted. (AQW 5392/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The criteria for salting school bus routes were considered in the review of my Department's winter service policy and procedures in 2001.

- The criteria for inclusion of roads in the salting schedule are as follows:
- all Motorways and Trunk roads shall be treated;
- main through routes which carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day shall be treated;
- other busy through routes, with special difficulties and carrying more than 1,000 vehicles per day shall be considered. The special difficulties considered include:-
 - severity, frequency, and extent of gradients;
 - frequency of bends;
 - height above sea level;
 - railway level crossings;
 - abnormally high junction frequencies.

Note, that within this category consideration will be given to the availability of alternative, or parallel routes, which are included in the salting schedule. Where such routes exist, the routes being considered under this criterion may not be salted; and

- small settlements, containing 100 dwellings or more, shall have a salted link to the nearest part of the existing salted network.

In addition to the above criteria, Roads Service provides salt bins or grit piles for public use, on a self help basis, on more lightly trafficked routes.

One of the key outcomes of the 2001 review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, should continue.

The review also estimated that to include all school bus routes within the Department's salting schedule, would more than double the annual cost of our salting operation. In addition to a substantial capital investment in new vehicles, it would cost between and extra £4.5-£7.0 million every year.

Nevertheless, the review recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. For example, a 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles for the purpose identifying qualifying routes.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even further funds into salting and increasing funding for other activities, such as road maintenance, or Roads Service's collision remedial works programme. You may be interested to note that the latter resulted in reducing the total number of target collisions in 2006/07 by 68%, while increased investment in road maintenance would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces throughout the whole of the year.

I have no plans to carry out a further review of my Department's winter service policy, as there has been no significant change in circumstances since the completion of the 2001 review. However, I can advise that officials are currently examining the operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

Footway Between Ballymena and Cullybackey

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what work has been done on constructing a footway between Woodtown Road, Ballymena and Cullybackey; and what plans are there to complete this work. (AQW 5411/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, during the last two financial years, 2007/08 to 2008/09, approximately 1.15 km of 2.0 metre wide asphalt footway has been constructed between the Woodtown Road, Ballymena and Cullybackey.

Detailed design of the remaining 0.8 km of footway required, to connect to the existing footway network in Cullybackey, is ongoing. The provision of this remaining link is currently included in the draft works programme for the 2010/11 financial year. However, this will be subject to the successful acquisition of land, and the availability of funding at that time.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many school bus routes in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area are not gritted during severe winter weather. (AQW 5414/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not hold records of the school bus routes which are included in the winter service schedule. I can also advise that as Translink don't operate a dedicated school bus fleet, it does not record information in respect of the mileage of bus services operated to carry children to and from school.

However, I can advise that the salting of school bus routes was considered in the 2001 review of my Department's Winter Service policy and procedures. One of the key outcomes of that review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, should continue.

The review also estimated that to include all school bus routes within the Department's gritting schedule, would more than double the annual cost of our salting operation. In addition to a substantial capital investment in new vehicles, it would cost some £4.5-£7.0 million extra every year.

Nevertheless, the review recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. A 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles, for the purpose identifying qualifying routes. Also as a result of the review, road links to small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more are now salted.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even further funds into salting and increasing funding for other activities, such as road maintenance, or Roads Service's collision remedial works programme. You may be interested to note that the latter resulted in reducing the total

number of target collisions in 2006/07 by 68%, while increased investment in road maintenance would improve the wet weather skidding resistance of road surfaces throughout the whole of the year.

I have no plans to carry out a further review of my Department's winter service policy, as there has been no significant change in circumstances since the completion of the 2001 review. However, I can advise that officials are currently examining the operational response to areas around schools, which are regularly affected by adverse weather conditions.

Water and Sewerage Infrastructure: Repairs

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Regional Development what arrangements and protocols are applied by his Department and its agencies in relation to dealing with repairs to water and sewerage infrastructure and roads and footpaths. (AQW 5432/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that utilities, including Northern Ireland Water (NIW), have a statutory right to open roads and footpaths for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment.

My Department's Roads Service has no control over the number of road and footpath openings, but has powers, under the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, to regulate the process. Roads Service carries out regular inspections of utility reinstatements, to ensure that these works are completed in accordance with the technical requirements, set out in the statutory reinstatement Code of Practice, "Specification for the Reinstatement of Openings in Roads". The Code of Practice prescribes the materials to be used and the standards of workmanship to be observed in reinstatements in roads and footways.

With regard to repairs to water and sewerage infrastructure, NIW has advised that response times for a range of services are set out in their Customer Charter which can be viewed on NIW's website at http://www.niwater.com/siteFiles/resources/pdf/COP/CCharter_v11.pdf. The Customer Charter sets out the standards of service that customers can expect and includes target timescales for dealing with repairs. These details are also available in NIW's published Codes of Practice.

Asbestos Pipes

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how much of the water system in East Antrim is in the form of asbestos pipes and when they will be replaced. (AQW 5435/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that there are approximately 860 kilometres of water mains in the East Antrim area of which 43 kilometres (approximately 5%) are asbestos cement pipes.

It is important to note that asbestos cement pipes are fully approved for use within Britain and here in the North and they are only replaced if there is a specific problem at a location, for example where there is insufficient hydraulic capacity or the structural condition of the pipework makes it susceptible to frequent bursts. NIW is progressively replacing asbestos cement pipework through its Mains Rehabilitation Programme. In the period from July 2004 to December 2008, almost 70 km of asbestos cement pipe was replaced and it is envisaged that a further 40 km will be replaced in 2009 based on the same criteria.

NIW continuously assesses the condition and performance of asbestos cement mains within the Watermains Rehabilitation Programme and during daily operational activity.

East Antrim: Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many traffic calming measures exist in East Antrim. (AQW 5437/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are 31 traffic calming schemes, and seven school travel and safety projects, in East Antrim.

School Bus Routes: Winter Gritting

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many school bus routes; (ii) and how many miles in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area were gritted during the severe winter weather.

(AQW 5469/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my reply to his recent Assembly Question AQW 5414/09.

South Eastern Education and Library Board Area: School Buses

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many accidents involving school buses occurred in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, over the period of severe winter weather. (AQW 5470/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that in the South Eastern Area there were no accidents directly attributable to the severe weather conditions during the period 30 January to 14 February involving dedicated school service vehicles.

The Minister of Education has informed me that she has been advised by the Chief Executive of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board that there was one accident involving an Education and Library Board bus.

Proposed Footbridge: Main Street, Beragh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress and estimated completion date of the proposed footbridge on Main Street, Beragh, County Tyrone. (AQW 5487/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that negotiations with landowners, affected by the planned footbridge, are at an advanced stage. Subject to the successful completion of this process, the scheme will be delivered in the 2009/10 financial year.

Road Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all road projects (i) for this year and (ii) planned for next year, and the value of the each investment. (AQW 5490/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service had nine major road schemes, under construction during this financial year, 2008/2009. In the 2009/2010 financial year Roads Service intends to commence a further five schemes, subject to satisfactory completion of the procurement process and availability of finance through the normal budgetary system. The tables below provide the detail requested on these schemes.

Major Road Schemes – Under Construction during 2008/2009			
Scheme	Start Date	Finish Date	Estimated Value £m
M1/Westlink upgrade - DBFO Package 1	2006	March 09	104
M2 Widening (Sandyknowes to Greencastle) - DBFO Package 1	2007	On-going	19.5
A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue - DBFO Package 2	2007	On going	152
A1 Junction Improvements - DBFO Package 2	2007	On-going	30
A4/A5 Improvements (A4 Annaghilla and A5 Tullyvar) - DBFO Package 2	2008	On-going	18
A4 Dungannon to Ballygawley - DBFO Package	2008	On-going	115
A4 Henry Street/Sligo Road, Enniskillen	2008	2008	1.7
A20 Newtownards Frederick Street Link	2008	2008	2.4
A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor	2008	On-going	14

Major Road Schemes – Planned to Commence 2009/2010	
Scheme	Estimated Value £m
A26/M2 Ballee Road East, Ballymena	12
A2 Broadbridge	46
A29 Carland Bridge Improvement	5
A32 Cherrymount Link	11
Cairnshill Park and Ride	10

With regard to the number of minor works and maintenance works, Roads Service can only provide overall spend figures because of the micro nature of some of the works, for example, pothole repairs, traffic sign repairs, etc. I can advise that Roads Service intends to spend some £23 million in 2008/2009 and £20 million in 2009/2010. This includes works such as minor improvements, collision remedial schemes, traffic calming, pedestrian and bus measures, etc. The estimated spend on minor bridge strengthening in 2008/2009 is £5 million and £4 million in 2009/2010.

Roads Service's expenditure on maintenance activities (including in-house contractor costs) in 2008/2009, will be in the region of £115 million and estimated to be some £125.7 million in 2009/2010. This includes works such as resurfacing, reconstruction, surface dressing, patching, as well as other routine maintenance activity, eg, winter service, grass cutting, gully emptying, etc.

M2: Third Citybound Lane

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm (i) the specific date that the third citybound lane of the M2 will be open to traffic, (ii) the official completion date of the project; and (iii) the date of the official opening ceremony. (AQW 5492/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the M2 Improvements Scheme is presently programmed to be substantially complete by April this year, and that the third lane of the citybound carriageway of the M2, between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions, is expected to be opened to traffic before this date. The official contract completion date is expected to be 20 August 2009. A date has not yet been set for the official opening ceremony.

M2: Expansion

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the future expansion of the M2 to four lanes, city and country bound; and if there would be any land or geographical constraints that would cause problems with this proposal. (AQW 5493/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Regional Development Strategy 2025, identified the M2 as one of the main Key Transport Corridors, connecting the north and north-west with Belfast. It also provides access to Belfast International Airport and the Port of Larne.

The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) identified the delivery of major capacity enhancement at key locations on the strategic road network in the form of road widening and junction improvements to address 'bottlenecks'.

On the M2, the BMTP proposed the widening of the southbound carriageway from Sandyknowes junction to the M2/M5 junction at Greencastle. This section of the M2 carries around 62,000 vehicles per day in both directions. When the works are completed, this three lane urban motorway will provide a flow capacity that is approximately double the present traffic volume.

My Department has no plans in the foreseeable future for any further widening of the M2 motorway to four lanes, and therefore, will not be examining the land or geographical constraints concerning further expansion, at this time.

Main Street, Crumlin: New storm drain

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the start and finish date of the project to lay a new storm drain in Main Street, Crumlin, and the surrounding area, and to detail how much this project will cost. (AQW 5495/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is providing a requisitioned sewer at Main Street, Crumlin for a proposed supermarket development and the requisitioner is required to pay the reasonable costs of providing the sewer as determined in accordance with Northern Ireland Water's charges scheme. It is estimated that work on the sewer will commence around May/June 2009 provided the reasonable costs have been paid in advance. The work will take four months to complete at a total cost of almost £161,000.

Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all Wastewater Treatment Works projects (i) for this year and (ii) planned for next year, and the value of the each investment. (AQW 5501/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW) projects detailed in the tables below are ongoing during the 2008/09 financial year and planned for 2009/10.

TABLE 1

Projects Ongoing During 2008/09	
Project Name	Project Total (£000s)
Darragh Cross WwTW	930
Killen WwTW	1,335
Park WwTW	2,094
Lower Ballinderry WwTW	1,444
Poundburn WwTW	805
Annahilt WwTW	5,052
Cloughy WwTW Interim Solution	1,740
Ballywalter WwTW Interim Solution	2,311
Ballyhalbert WwTW Interim Solution	4,173
Seahill WwTW	7,429
Downpatrick WwTW	11,086
Small WwTWs Priority Upgrades	10,911
Newry WWTW Aeration upgrade	473
Coalisland WwTW	8,036
Moygashel WwTW	3,572
Benburb/Milltown - RBC Installations West & South	3,645
Castlecaulfield WwTW	3,375
Mountfield WwTW	392
Enniskillen WwTW	13,819
Derrylin WwTW	3,323
Dromore WwTW	5,659

Projects Ongoing During 2008/09	
Project Name	Project Total (£000s)
Gilford WwTW	1,942
Crossmaglen WwTW	1,962
Castlewellan WwTW	5,612
Warrenpoint WwTW	2,944
Milltown, Antrim WwTW	22,356
Lisbarnet WwTW	4,447
Clough WwTW	3,536
Annahilt WwTW	5,052
Dromara WwTW	3,190
Saintfield WwTW	5,347
Draperstown WwTW	3,387
Bushmills + Portballintrae WwTW	8,033
Seahill WwTW	7,429
Portaferry WwTW	5,920
Limavady WwTW	6,785
Hamiltonsbawn WwTW	4,405
Hilltown WwTW	1,519
Cullaville WwTW	980
Belleeks WwTW	647
Newtownbreda, Dunmurry, New Holland WWTWs - Nutrient Removal	708
Magherafelt WwTW	5,347
Edenderry WwTW	511
	193,663

TABLE 2

Projects Planned For 2009/10	
Project Name	Project Total (£000s)
Donnybrewer WwTW	1,521
Benone Area Sewerage	7,301
Feeny WwTW	1,383
Moneymore STW Imps	1,845
Maghera WwTW	2,889
Coagh WwTW Improvements	1,715
Martinstown WwTW	1,756
Cargan WwTW	1,319
Cloughmills WwTW	1,193
Ballybogey WwTW	683
Newtownbreda WwTW	11,944

Projects Planned For 2009/10	
Project Name	Project Total (£000s)
Ballygowan WwTW	3,264
Dunmurry WwTW Modifications	8,775
Hook's Corner WwTW	1,260
Stewartstown WwTW Improvements	1,773
Lougheries WwTW	338
Parkgate WwTW Rationalization	937
Aghnaloo WwTW	3,388
Ballymonie WwTW	1,569
Lurganare WwTW	940
Toome (Creagh) Sewerage Scheme	8,584
Dungiven WwTW	3,555
Ardglass WwTW	5,946
Bessbrook/Newry WwTW	8,927
Strangford WwTW	3,089
Lawrencetown WwTW Upgrade	884
Mullaghboy WwTW	961
Portavogie WwTW Interim Solution	1,899
Whitehead, Ballystruder & Ballycarry Rationalisation	8,351
Ballyhalbert WwTW Interim Solution	4,173
	102,162

Royal National Institute for the Blind

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development how many meetings he has had with the Royal National Institute for the Blind; and what the outcomes of the meetings were. (AQW 5564/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have not met with the Royal Institute for the Blind (RNIB) since I took up my Ministerial post. However, an officer from my Department has recently been nominated to join the RNIB Vision Strategy Implementation Group to help progress the strategic objectives of the Vision Strategy.

Hibernia Street Car Park, Holywood

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development when a decision is expected by his Department on the issues surrounding Hibernia Street car park in Holywood. (AQW 5567/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that work on this matter is progressing and I will write to him, with a response, in due course.

Roads Service

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, following a meeting between an applicant and Planning Service, when revised plans were agreed in principle, why the Roads Service has taken over eight weeks to provide a formal response to Planning Service about social housing planning application ref U/2006/0560, and when Planning Service can expect a response. (AQW 5599/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In respect of planning application U/2006/0560/F, as part of the consultation exercise, my Department's Roads Service attended a meeting on 18 November 2008, with the agent/applicant, hosted by Planning Service, to discuss outstanding issues.

At the meeting a road alignment drawing was tabled in order to address road design issues. While this proposal was acceptable, in principle, it was noted that this alignment would impact on an existing, previously approved development, resulting in the displacement of car parking.

Roads Service received amended drawings for this application on 5 January 2009. An additional development application, to resolve the displaced car parking issues, was received on 6 January 2009. However, due to a significant backlog in development applications, and instruction from Planning Service to prioritise other planning applications, Roads Service has been unable to provide a formal response to Planning Service. Roads Service will endeavour to consider both applications and respond to Planning Service by 6 March 2009.

Roads Service

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development following a meeting between the applicant, and Planning Service, where revised plans were agreed, in principle, why has Roads Service taken over eight weeks to provide a formal response for social housing planning application ref U/2006/0560, and when can they expect a response. (AQW 5600/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my answer to Assembly Question AQW 5599/09.

Road Closures

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5263/09, if he will consider contacting local and major media outlets, when road closures are planned, to minimise the possibility of problems like the one that affected the M2 recently. (AQW 5604/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I advised the Member, in my reply to his recent Assembly Questions AQW 5263/09 and AQW 5264/09, the planned closure of the M2 on Sunday 15 February was well advertised through the normal range of channels, which included:

- a press release to the media;
- an interview with a Roads Service official on Radio Ulster;
- Roads Service's website (Trafficwatchni);
- Roads Service's active email alert service; and
- Roads Service's Road Works Report.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that the press release was sent to all media outlets throughout the North, including all television channels, radio stations and local and regional newspapers. It should be noted that, while Roads Service made every effort to inform as many people as possible of the planned closure of the M2, the decision to communicate the message rests solely with each media outlet.

As a consequence of the traffic jams on Sunday 15 February, Roads Service will review its notification procedures for all future motorway works. In the meantime, Roads Service will continue to notify all media outlets about planned major road closures.

Road-Calming Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new road calming schemes will go ahead in the North Down area, in the next financial year. (AQW 5616/09)

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, which 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 2009/10 financial year, I can advise that Roads Service proposes to provide the following traffic calming schemes in the North Down Borough Council area:

- Seahill Road, Holywood;
- Ballymacconnell Road South, Bangor;
- Skipperstone Road/Whitehill area, Bangor;
- Bryansburn Road / Brunswick Road, Bangor;
- Church Road, Holywood;
- Groomsport Road, Bangor;
- Croft Road, Holywood; and
- Abbey Ring, Holywood.

These schemes are subject to the successful conclusion of the public consultation and legislative processes.

Independent Travel

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken to promote independent travel on buses, trains and cycles by persons with learning disabilities. (AQW 5630/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Under the Accessible Transport Strategy my Department published a Travel Safe guide to promote independent travel for people with learning disabilities.

A total of 3,000 copies of the guide were distributed to a variety of groups including special educational need schools, day and resource centres, church groups, advisory organisations, health care providers and individuals.

My Department also commissioned its independent advisors (Imtac) to research how best to further promote travel on public transport for people with learning disabilities. In light of the Bamford Review we have asked Imtac to further gauge the impact of the Accessible Transport Strategy on people with learning difficulties and mental health service users.

Sligo to Enniskillen Roadway

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on improving the Sligo to Enniskillen roadway; and whether this matter was on the agenda of the recent North South Ministerial Council meeting. (AQW 5661/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The M1/A4, running from Belfast to the Border at Belcoo is identified as a Key Transport Corridor in the Regional Development Strategy 2025. Extensive works are currently in progress to upgrade this route between Dungannon and Augher. Over 20 km of dual carriageway are under construction between Dungannon and Ballygawley and a further 4 km of widened (2+1) single carriageway are being built between Ballygawley and Augher.

Furthermore, my Department's Investment Delivery Plan for roads (2008-18), published earlier this year, includes proposals for bypasses of Enniskillen and Fivemiletown, which will relieve congestion at these bottlenecks on this route and further enhance regional journey times.

These proposals reflect a phased development of this Key Transport Corridor in the North.

In the South, I understand that the National Roads Authority is carrying out route selection work, with a view to starting further schemes, as resources become available.

The upgrading of the Enniskillen to Sligo Road was not raised at the North South Ministerial Council meeting held in plenary format on 23 January 2009.

However, this issue was discussed at my Bilateral Transport meeting with Noel Dempsey, TD, on 7 November 2008 and I will raise it again at the next North South Ministerial Council Transport Sector meeting in April 2009.

Northern Ireland Railways

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many Northern Ireland companies; and (ii) how many companies from outside Northern Ireland and the UK are to be involved in the Northern Ireland Railways track relay between Coleraine and Ballymena. (AQW 5706/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In total 12 companies will be involved in completing work on the track between Coleraine and Ballymena. Of these nine are local companies, two are from England and one is from France.

New Buses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any additional orders for new buses supplied by Wrightbus in Ballymena, included in Translink's plans for next year. (AQW 5707/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As part of their current bus replacement programme Translink aim to purchase over 150 buses during the next two years. Wrights have been successful in previous tenders for bus supply with Translink. During 2008/09, 45 of the buses purchased were supplied by Wright Bus with Scania. The timing of future orders in relation to the 150 buses will be subject to budget planning and compliance with procurement rules.

SmartPass Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the extension of the Half Price Smart Pass scheme to include return tickets. (AQW 5708/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that, from Monday 30 March 2009, holders of the Half Fare SmartPass will be able to purchase day return tickets on Northern Ireland Railways services.

Rural Transport Schemes

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development for an assessment of rural transport schemes, and to detail what recommendations his Department has proposed in relation to child safety and the protection of drivers. (AQO 2263/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I consider the rural transport schemes, operated by 18 Rural Community Transport Partnerships and supported by the Rural Transport Fund to have been a great success. Since the inception of the Rural Transport Fund in 1998, the partnerships have been delivering lifeline services to rural dwellers with reduced mobility.

Although my Department has proposed no recommendations in relation to child safety and the protection of drivers, I can confirm that all drivers are Access NI checked and trained to MiDAS (Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme) standard. All the minibuses used to provide services are fitted with seatbelts. Each partnership also has a child protection policy.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Translation Services

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development what was the (i) total cost incurred by her Department; and (ii) hourly rate paid to interpreters, for translation services for residents from foreign countries, in each of the last two financial years. (AQW 5020/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The expenditure incurred by my Department in respect of translation services including interpreters for customers whose first language is not English in the last two financial years, is shown in the table below. The hourly rate paid to interpreters for translations services cannot

be provided as this information is commercially sensitive. The cost incurred includes my Department's agencies and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Year	Amount
2006/2007	£260,281
2007/2008	£137,963

Housing Executive: Properties

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in (i) Newtownabbey II; and (ii) Antrim District office areas are boarded up and not being offered for occupation. (AQW 5115/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not record the number of properties boarded up. The table below details the properties at 31 January 2009 in the Newtownabbey II and Antrim District Office areas which are undergoing repairs or pending sale or demolition. Any properties undergoing major repairs or improvements will be brought back into use.

Housing Executive District Office	Undergoing Major Repairs / Improvements (Including Decants)	Pending Sale or Demolition
Newtownabbey 2	70	0
Antrim	95	79

Housing Executive: Budget

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what strategies has she put in place to overcome the anticipated shortfall in the Housing Executive budget due to a fall in house and land sales; and how she will meet the targets in the Programme for Government to build 5,200 houses over the next three years. (AQW 5139/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The anticipated shortfall in the housing budget is approximately £100 million in each of the next two years. I will be making every effort to secure additional resources and to make available resources stretch further. There is no target in the Programme for Government to build 5200 houses over the next three years.

Heating Installation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she would consider reviewing the heating installed in houses with special adaptations to determine its adequacy for elderly and disabled people. (AQW 5157/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has no specific plans to review the heating installed in houses with special adaptations to determine its adequacy for elderly and disabled people. The Housing Executive's policy in relation to changes of heating outside normal improvement programmes is primarily concerned with providing a non-manual heating system for people with a disability who are unable or find it difficult to operate their heating system. If any tenant believes their heating system is inadequate they may apply to the Housing Executive for the heating system in their home to be changed to gas or oil heating.

South Antrim: Introductory Tenancies

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many introductory tenancies were terminated on grounds of anti-social behaviour, in the South Antrim constituency, in 2008. (AQW 5167/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive did not terminate any introductory tenancies within the relevant District Office areas on the grounds of anti-social behaviour in 2008.

Divis Tower: Housing Executive

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Social Development what role the Housing Executive had in the provision of a new garden at Divis Tower in memory of Brendan Hughes, a former leader in the Provisional IRA; and how this relates to its commitment to 'a shared and better future'. (AQW 5299/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The community garden, situated on Housing Executive owned land, was funded through the Greencare Phase 3 programme, which is managed through Groundwork NI and jointly funded by the Housing Executive and Belfast City Council as part of a series of projects throughout Belfast. The original application was for a community garden only for use by the residents of Divis Tower.

The decision to erect a plaque at the garden appears to have been taken by the residents after the completion of the works - without the agreement, involvement or knowledge of the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive understands that no funding was provided for the erection of a plaque through the Greencare Phase 3 programme.

Independent Living Fund

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister for Social Development in relation to the Independent Living (Extension) Fund and the Independent Living (1993) Fund (i) how many people are receiving funding; (ii) how many are receiving more than £320; and (iii) how many staff have received training to process applications, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 5330/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The latest available figures on Independent Living Fund awards and those awards in excess of £320 are contained in the following table:

Trust Name	Number receiving Funding	Award over £320
Belfast Health & Social Care	177	37
Eastern Health & Social Care	138	33
Northern Health & Social Care	164	19
Southern Health & Social Care	217	31
Western Health & Social Care	222	46
Total	918	166

In Northern Ireland there are 4 Independent Living Fund Assessors. They receive full training in the application process when they commence their work on a self-employed basis and attend further training each year in addition to receiving regular policy updates.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to increase the number of successful applications to the Warm Homes Scheme from Larne, in light of the high level of fuel poverty in this area as indicated by the Housing Executive Conditions Survey 2006. (AQW 5370/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme has spent over £1.2million in the Larne area improving the energy efficiency of vulnerable people's homes. A new Warm Homes Scheme will be operational in the spring. The new Scheme managers will be required to target areas where need is greatest or where take up relative to need is low. The Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2006 will be of particular use in identifying areas in need.

Housing Repairs: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what money she has allocated to the North Down area in the next financial year for routine housing repairs by the Housing Executive. (AQW 5420/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget, this information is not yet available.

Housing Executive: Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the significant rise in cases of damp and serious condensation in Housing Executive properties, over the past three years. (AQW 5449/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive is not in a position to clearly establish the reasons for the increase but do consider that the impact of extreme weather conditions and fuel costs has contributed to this.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what the impact of the economic downturn has been on the delivery of her current policies and practices; and (ii) what changes to existing policies and practices have been made in relation to her Department's responsibilities to address the effects of the economic downturn. (AQW 5462/09)

The Minister for Social Development:

- (i) At an operational level, my Department is managing the real impact of the economic downturn as it affects the normal course of business. This entails putting additional staff into frontline services to deal with increases in unemployment, reprioritising services to stay within reduced budgets and in particular, reprioritising services in Housing to stay within a budget greatly diminished by reduced receipts as a result of the collapse of house and land sales.
- (ii) I and my Executive colleagues remain committed to doing all that we can to protect local people and business from the worst effects of the economic downturn. Consequently, the economic situation is a standing item of Executive Business and the Executive collectively, is managing the overall response. In relation to Departmental practices in housing we have introduced a series of initiatives that try to make the budget stretch further. For example, forming procurement groups and requiring that more social houses are built on land that is already in public ownership.

While the current priorities of the Programme for Government remain valid, my Department remains committed to delivering the full Programme, although the difficult economic context makes this much more challenging. I am convinced that, as public expenditure is the only significant lever available to the Executive in addressing the economic downturn, it is essential that resources are directed to those areas that sustain employment and stimulate the economy.

Antisocial Behaviour Cases: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of the anti-social behaviour cases (i) reported; and (ii) dealt with by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the North Down constituency, in each of the past three years. (AQW 5468/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by Parliamentary Constituency. However, information regarding the anti-social behaviour cases reported to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's District Offices in the North Down and Ards District Council areas for 2006, 2007 and 2008 is as follows:-

	2006	2007	2008
Bangor	250	220	207
Newtownards	151	207	174

In relation to (ii) all cases were dealt with by the Housing Executive.

Housing Executive: Homes

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been evicted from Housing Executive homes broken down by (i) month; and (ii) constituency, in each of the last 3 years, (AQW 5480/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive reports evictions on an annual basis and by District Office.

The following table gives the evictions in each of the last three years by Housing Executive District Office:-

NIHE District	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Belfast West	1	0	1
Belfast East	0	4	4
Belfast South	0	2	0
Belfast North	4	7	2
Belfast Shankill	6	3	4
(Area Totals)	11	16	11
Bangor	4	0	6
Newtownards	3	1	1
Castle'reagh	4	1	1
Lisburn	9	8	6
Down	3	4	0
(Area Totals)	23	14	14
Banbridge	0	2	0
Newry	0	0	0
Armagh	2	1	0
Lurgan/Brownlow	6	3	3
Portadown	5	2	1
Dungannon	3	1	5
Fermanagh	3	0	5
(Area Totals)	19	9	14
Ballymena	0	0	2
Antrim	0	0	1
Newtownabeey	0	0	8
Carrickfergus	1	6	2
Larne	0	2	0
Ballycastle	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0
Coleraine	0	0	2
(Area Totals)	1	8	15
Waterloo	0	0	0
Waterside	3	2	0
Collon Terrace	1	0	3
Limavady	3	0	0

NIHE District	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Magherafelt	3	1	0
Strabane	0	0	0
Omagh	0	1	5
Cookstown	0	0	2
(Area Totals)	10	4	10

Mahon Road Site, Portadown

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Social Development what determining factors were used to identify the Mahon Road site in Portadown as a suitable location for the co-ownership scheme; and were any other sites examined for suitability in the Portadown area. (AQW 5484/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Mahon Road initiative in Portadown is not part of the co-ownership scheme but is a separate initiative known as Own A Home . This is a developer led scheme, instigated by Turkington Holdings, in partnership with Clanmil and South Ulster Housing Associations and Barclays Bank. The Department responded to this development by facilitating contact between these interested parties in order to support this initiative as an affordable route into home ownership.

Social Security Offices: Hollywood Arches

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development what the average waiting time is for a job interview at the Social Security Offices at the Hollywood Arches, East Belfast (AQW 5534/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Jobs & Benefits service is jointly delivered by the Social Security Agency (SSA) and the Department for Employment Learning (DEL). A new claim interview comprises two parts:

A claim form check carried out by SSA staff

A work focused interview (WFI) carried out by DEL staff.

The current waiting time for a first interview for a new Jobseeker in Hollywood Road Jobs & Benefits office (JBO) is 15 days.

Social Housing: Cushendall

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development what the level of need is for social housing in Cushendall; and what plans she has to provide this housing. (AQW 5543/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The waiting list for Cushendall shows that there are 58 people in need of housing, 33 of which are in housing stress.

The new Social Housing Development Programme for 2009/10 – 2013/14 is currently being considered and when approved will be published on the Housing Executive's website at www.nihe.gov.uk.

Housing Executive: Homes in Enniskillen

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are on the waiting list for Housing Executive homes in Enniskillen. (AQW 5552/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As at December 2008, there were 435 applicants on the waiting list in Enniskillen.

Savilles Estate Agents

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5283, what the relationship is between the steering group and Savilles estate agents. (AQW 5601/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There is no relationship between the steering group and Savilles estate agents.

Savilles Estate Agents

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what role Savilles estate agents played in the compilation of the Housing Executive's five year housing condition survey. (AQW 5603/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Savilles estate agents played no role in the compilation of the Housing Executive's five year house Condition Survey.

Following a tender process, Savilles were however appointed to carry out the Stock Condition Survey on behalf of the Department for Social Development.

Carers' Review

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4688/09, if she could be more specific than 'the review will be completed in the near future'. (AQW 5608/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have asked for a report on the joint review to be provided before Easter.

Housing Executive: Tenants in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what maintenance schemes will go ahead in the North Down area for Housing Executive tenants, in the next financial year. (AQW 5615/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget, this information is not yet available.

Warm Homes Scheme

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development if the contract to deliver the Warm Homes Scheme has been put out to tender, and if so, when the process is likely to be completed. (AQW 5626/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which is a centre of excellence for procurement, has been handling the procurement for the new Warm Homes Scheme. The tender process is well under way. The evaluation of all applications received has been completed and applicants informed of the outcome. As tenders have not yet been invited I am unable to comment further but I expect the new scheme managers to be appointed in May 2009.

Jobs and Benefits Office: Newcastle

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development when Newcastle office is refurbished and reopened as a Jobs and Benefits Office, why there will not be room for the remaining Social Security Administration staff to return; and if the plans could be made available to the staff. (AQW 5631/09)

The Minister for Social Development: While every effort has been made to maximise the capacity of the Valentia Place site, physical constraints and Planning Service restrictions mean that there is a limit to the number of staff the office will accommodate. Final decisions as to which staff will be deployed in the new Newcastle Jobs & Benefits office will be taken once the Equality Impact Assessment has been completed.

Plans for the internal layout of the new office are at an early stage of development. Local staff and management will be consulted about the office layout when these plans have been refined.

Jobs and Benefits Office: Newcastle

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why Social Security Administration staff in Newcastle and the service they provide are under threat again. (AQW 5632/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There is no threat to the Social Security service or to the employment of the staff currently located in Newcastle. The Agency remains committed to delivering a Jobs & Benefits service for Newcastle.

Jobs and Benefits Office: Newcastle

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development why Newcastle Social Security Office has been subjected to the Strategic Business Review before a decision has been made following the public consultation period. (AQW 5633/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Newcastle Social Security Office has not been subjected to any potential outworkings of the Strategic Business Review in advance of a decision on the way forward with this Review.

Social Fund Staff: Newcastle

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development if she has considered the implications for families of Social Fund staff in Newcastle who under the Strategic Business Review will have to move twice, first to Downpatrick then to Holywood Road; and what are the implications on the female work force who have caring responsibilities. (AQW 5634/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The SBR proposals are currently the subject of public consultation and final decisions on the proposals, including the movement of staff, will not be made until consultation has been completed (late April 2009) and the responses have been fully considered.

Accommodation in Owner-Occupied and Private Sectors

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development whether increasing numbers of people are presenting as homeless because of loss of accommodation in owner occupied and private sectors. (AQW 5648/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Following table shows the number of households presenting as homeless as a result of the loss of accommodation by mortgage default and loss of private rented accommodation in the six months from August 2008 to January 2009.

Month	Mortgage Default	Loss of private rented accommodation
August 2008	10	118
September 2008	25	137
October 2008	35	124
November 2008	26	120
December 2008	18	91
January 2009	28	119
Total:	142	709

In the past six months there has been no discernable increase in the number of households presenting as homeless as a result of the loss of private rented accommodation. With regard to households presenting as homeless, due to mortgage default, there has been an increase of approximately 40% on the same period last year.

Housing Executive: Properties in South Antrim

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development the number of vacant Housing Executive properties in the South Antrim constituency. (AQW 5664/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by Parliamentary constituency. However, at 31 January 2009, 248 Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties were vacant in the Housing Executive's District Offices at Antrim and Newtownabbey 2.

Housing Executive: Properties in South Antrim

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development whether the number of vacant Housing Executive properties in South Antrim is in excess of requirements and what consideration she would give to releasing these properties to address the growing homelessness problem. (AQW 5666/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Whilst there is a clearly assessed housing need for general needs applicants in South Antrim who have registered on the Common Waiting List, it does not necessarily follow that vacant Housing Executive properties can ameliorate this need.

At any given time there will be a number of vacant or void Housing Executive dwellings, mostly for operational reasons; dwellings being re-let, improved or earmarked for use as temporary accommodation while major improvements are carried out. These properties form part of the housing supply. The number of vacant dwelling being held for decanting to facilitate improvements is kept under review.

E-mail: Increasing Usage of

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of email. (AQW 5733/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department is continuing to implement its 2006 Policy on Sustainable Operations on the Department for Social Development Office Estate in order to become more resource efficient and reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. One specific aspect of reducing waste is to reduce paper consumption. This involves an increasing usage of electronic means of communication via the Department for Social Development Intranet, e-mail facilities and the Northern Ireland Civil Service Electronic Records Management System introduced in 2008 which allows storage and viewing of electronic documents.

Housing Executive: Rent Increases

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development how much additional revenue the Housing Executive expects to raise in 2009/10 from approved rent increases for its tenants. (AQW 5755/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive expects to receive additional revenue of £4.54m in respect of the 2009/10 rent increase of 1.95%.

Departmental Functions: Transfer to Local Government

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to outline which functions will transfer from her Department to Local Government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 2212/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I am very pleased to see the positive engagement that has developed between local government and Departments on the transfer of certain functions to the new local Councils in May 2011. As this House will know from my previous public statements on the Review of Public Administration, I fully support a vision of strong local government that has the needs of all citizens at its core and which is fully empowered through its responsibility for community planning.

My Department will be transferring substantial functions to the new local Councils including responsibility for the operational delivery of urban regeneration and support for the voluntary and community sector at local level. I will also be transferring housing functions relating to houses in multiple occupation, housing unfitness,

Traveller transit sites and local energy conservation. These functions rest naturally within local government and my officials and I will work enthusiastically in partnership with the structures the Minister for Local Government has established to achieve a smooth transition to delivery by the new local Councils.

Housing Agenda: EU Resources

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development if she has taken advantage of the resources of the European Union in advancing the new housing agenda. (AQO 2213/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the New Housing Agenda last year, I made it clear that I would be looking for innovative solutions we all want to see delivered. The Agenda included an Empty Homes Strategy, making the best use of surplus government land, a new Procurement Strategy and changes to the House Sales Scheme to name but a few. That is why I am pleased to report to the House that as part of our Housing Programme, Clanmil Housing Association has recently secured £15million from the European Investment Bank to support the delivery of three new housing projects across Belfast – a first for Northern Ireland.

This funding will help finance inner city residential developments on the Ormeau Road, at Pilot Street and at Sunningdale Gardens. In total 238 new homes will be provided to help those in greatest housing need, a key objective of the New Housing Agenda.

Northern Ireland has already benefited in so many ways from European funding packages and I am delighted that housing can now be added to that list.

My Department has already met with the Housing Finance Corporation who made the necessary arrangements to deliver this funding and I hope we can attract further European investment for housing here in the future.

Social Housing: Private-Sector Finance

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to attract greater private sector finance into the social and affordable housing sector. (AQO 2214/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the New Housing Agenda I made it clear that we would look to bring forward greater levels of Private Finance to complement the resources already committed from the Public Purse. Since then I have reduced our subsidy to Housing Associations by approximately 10%, in effect requiring Housing Associations to contribute even greater levels of Private Finance in the delivery of new social homes. We have already mentioned the European Investment Bank £15m for Clanmil Housing Association which will further support our work. Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association has also for the first time been able to attract their own significant private investment to deliver affordable housing and I am very encouraged to see that the Ulster Bank has recently agreed to work with Co-ownership in making 100 % mortgages without deposits available to applicants.

In addition to this my officials continue to work closely with the Strategic Investment Board to identify new opportunities to complement the delivery of our Programme. I am determined to leave no stone unturned in my desire to provide more housing opportunities for those in greatest need.

Social Security Agency: Efficiency Savings

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development, if under proposed efficiency savings for the Social Security Agency which will result in the phasing out of up to 200 jobs by 2011, what assurance she can give to those wishing to remain in employment with the Social Security Agency that their jobs will not be under threat. (AQO 2215/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have said repeatedly that whatever changes are made to improve SSA services that no-one in the Agency will lose their employment. That remains the position. And no office will close. If the service improvement initiatives yield efficiencies in the medium term it will not threaten staff employment.

Travellers: Programmes/Schemes

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development if the planning of any programmes or schemes in relation to Travellers' sites is determined by the geographical choice of Traveller families, a statutory requirement, or a matter of policy. (AQO 2216/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is responsible for the provision of accommodation for Travellers. The planning of any programmes or schemes is based on the scale of need within the geographical areas of choice of Traveller families and is informed by a comprehensive strategic needs assessment of current and projected accommodation requirements of all Travellers. The latest Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment was launched in December 2008 and will be used to facilitate decision making in relation to future accommodation schemes for the Traveller Community.

Belfast: Arterial Route Scheme

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the arterial route scheme in Belfast. (AQO 2217/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Sponsored by the Department for Social Development but delivered by Belfast City Council, the arterial routes scheme relates to environmental improvements along a number of key nodes within West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area, namely, Falls Road, Shankill Road, Springfield Road, Crumlin Road and Broadway. The programme of work complements regeneration initiatives already underway in these areas including Neighbourhood Renewal and the Renewing the Routes Programme.

A significant level of work has already taken place on the Shankill, Springfield, Crumlin and Falls Roads including commercial frontage improvements, floodlighting, public realm and environmental improvement. The future work programme includes further commercial, environmental and landscaping schemes along the targeted routes and the installation of a significant art piece for the Gaeltacht Quarter 'An Ceiliúradh/Celebration'. The scheme is due to complete in March 2010.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of eligibility for financial assistance for insulation under the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQO 2218/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Householders with a child under the age of 16 who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit and householders over the age of 60 who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit are eligible for insulation measures under the current Warm Homes Scheme. The eligibility criteria for insulation measures under the new Warm Homes Scheme are being extended to include householders who are in receipt of Working Tax Credit. This will ensure that assistance is targeted at the most vulnerable people and those in greatest need of help to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

Housing Maintenance Programme

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development if Housing Maintenance Programmes will proceed, and if not, what plans she has to bring forward a detailed breakdown of where cuts will be made. (AQO 2219/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is too early in the review of the Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that might be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget. The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall and a proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made. This is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. The Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes within its programmes at the earliest opportunity and will ensure that all emergency and urgent tenant repairs will be completed.

Programme for Government

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the Executive's Programme for Government, in light of the current economic downturn. (AQO 2220/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I can only speak for my own Department in assessing the impact of the economic downturn on the Programme for Government. In saying this however, I am sure my colleagues are experiencing similar problems as many of the assumptions that underpinned the Programme from the outset have been fundamentally changed. It is therefore imperative for commitments to be re-assessed to reflect a more realistic position.

Currently in my own Department's capital programme which impacts housing and urban regeneration targets, there is shortfall in the region of £180million over the next two years largely because of a reduction in receipts from house and land sales and the difficulties in leveraging in private finance and disposing of assets. While I am doing everything I can to ensure we meet our targets, including those for housing, the outlook is not particularly good.

The social and economic focus of my Department's portfolio means that the reported increases in unemployment will put pressure on frontline services at a time when people need us most for help and support.

The rise in the number of families suffering from fuel poverty as a result of significantly higher oil prices last year and the associated monetary assistance required from my Department has additionally put pressure on finite resources.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Social Development if all persons eligible for the £150 payment towards winter fuel costs, will receive the payment in this financial year. (AQO 2221/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Following the designation of my Department on 17 February to develop a Fuel Payment Scheme, I presented proposals to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 23 February for their consideration. My proposals were subsequently considered by the Executive on 26 February, when they were approved.

Much work has already been undertaken to make payments as quickly as possible. However, given that some 150,000 households will benefit from this payment, which amounts to over £22.5million, it has been necessary to engage the assistance of the Department for Work and Pensions to make the payments through the UK-wide Benefit Systems. By using the Benefit Systems, payments will be made considerably quicker than by any other means and this will also ensure that payments are made accurately and securely. Work is continuing to finalise the system requirements to make the payment, which will be made in April.

Strategic Business Review: Job Losses

Mr Brolly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of staff working in Social Security Offices who will lose their jobs under the Strategic Business Review of the Social Security Agency. (AQO 2222/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer the member to my previous response to AQW 3082/09, and would re-emphasise, there is no risk of staff working in Social Security Offices losing their employment under the proposed Strategic Business Review of the Social Security Agency.

Economic Downturn

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Social Development what proposals she has brought forward to the Executive to help counter the effects of the economic downturn. (AQO 2223/09)

The Minister for Social Development: On 27 November 2008 I submitted a paper to my Executive colleagues entitled 'Social Housing – An effective way to address the Downturn in the NI Economy.' In this paper I outlined how an increased investment in social housing could have a profoundly beneficial effect on the economy in a relatively short period of time.

In addition to the economic benefits of increased investment in social housing, delivery against important social policy objectives, particularly those identified in the Programme for Government, could be more quickly achieved with this investment.

My paper contained specific and costed proposals for increases in the Social Housing Development Programme, social housing maintenance and repairs and the Warm Homes Scheme. Unfortunately the Executive was not able to support my proposals at that time. However, I remain convinced that the current market conditions are more suited now than ever before to increase our investment in social housing to stimulate the economy, protect jobs and help those in housing stress. I will continue to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support of my proposals.

Mortgage Relief Scheme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what benefits the Mortgage Relief Scheme provides for people who have difficulty in meeting their mortgage repayments and face the prospect of their homes being repossessed. (AQO 2224/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The current increase in mortgage arrears and consequential increase in home repossessions here is a direct result of the worldwide credit crunch. As a result of my concerns last year, I announced my desire to introduce a Mortgage Rescue Scheme.

Consultation on the Mortgage Rescue Scheme concluded shortly before Christmas and officials are currently considering responses. It is anticipated however, that the Scheme will take two elements: prevention and intervention. The prevention element of the scheme would provide advice to people either facing or actually in arrears to explore the options available to them. The intervention element would potentially help people facing repossession to sell their home either in full or in part to a Housing Association and then rent it back. The introduction of the Scheme will be subject to securing funding and the appropriate approvals to spend that money.

Housing Benefit

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to make the existing housing budget stretch further. (AQO 2225/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A Procurement Strategy has been drawn up and will become operative from April 2009. Collaborative procurement will provide the conditions for integrating resources, improving consistency and continuity and obtaining better value for money. One of the overall goals of the strategy is to procure the Social Housing Development Programme on a value for money basis and in accordance with best practice. One of the primary objectives of the strategy is to achieve a noticeable increase in efficiency with a minimum target of 10% cost efficiency over a five year period. This should enable more houses to be built for the same amount of funding

A key element of social housing provision is Total Cost Indicators (TCI). The Total Cost Indicators allowances have reduced significantly in the last (autumn 2008) review and will fall again in the coming spring 2009 review, thereby enabling more social housing units to be provided within the allocated budget.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Printed Paper Office

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission how much money has been spent by the Printed Paper Office on (i) printing; and (ii) all publications that have been sent to Assembly Members since devolution was restored. (AQW 5326/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray): From 8 May 2007 until 31 January 2009 the total amount spent by the Printed Paper Office on printing was £381,085.40.

Out of the above figure, £258,340.55 related to print costs incurred on publications delivered to both Members and Secretariat staff.

Printed Paper Office

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission how many Assembly Members have chosen to receive reports by email rather than hard copy. (AQW 5327/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray): Following a survey of Members' requirements carried out by the Printed Paper Office last summer, 22 Members have chosen to receive Committee Reports by email rather than hard copy.

Printed Paper Office

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission to list all the work and initiatives it has undertaken to reduce the amount of paper that elected members receive. (AQW 5328/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray): Following a survey of Members and a review of distribution lists last summer (2008), Hansard was able to reduce the numbers of hard copy reports sent to Members — 18 Members no longer receive hard copy Bound Volumes (a reduction of 17%) and 40 Members no longer receive hard copy daily reports (a reduction of 37%).

The Printed Paper Office also carried out a survey of Members' requirements, by issuing a 'Publication Request Form' last August (copy attached). The responses of which have led to an average total reduction in print of 35%.

The Printed Paper Office plans to review Members' requirements on an annual basis.

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